THE PILOT OF THE CLOUD PATROL

By IRVING CRUMP

BUDDY BOOKS FOR BOYS

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Author of
THE CLOUD PATROL

Don Craig, Babe Crawford and Dan England, members of a troup or scouts in the west, and enthusiastic amateur aviators, secure summer positions in the Fullerton Air Craft plant in New Jersey and come east to a startling series of adventures as a result of their association with Mr. Harmon, the test pilot of the Fullerton Company. There are thrills in the air and on the ground and Don and his companions find themselves facing some serious situations. How would you like to come crashing down thousands of feet in a machine out of control? How would you like to face going into a burning hangar knowing that a drum of gasoline might explode and blow the place to atoms any moment? How would you like to find yourself forced to pilot a machine in the biggest race of the year and bring it home a winner? All these and many others are the thrills that Don and his companions experience in this new book of the series.

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#15 #2 in series

THE PILOT OF THE CLOUD PATROL

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AS LINDY SPRANG AT HIM, HE TRIPPED OVER A CHOCK AND WENT DOWN ON HIS BACK.

The Pilot of the Cloud Patrol. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 31)

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THE PILOT OF THE CLOUD PATROL

CHAPTER I

"If any two fellows ever courted death, it's Maul and that little chump Tinker Muir up there in that old Curtis Jenny. Safety first doesn't mean anything more than conversation to those two birds," said Don Craig with a note of disgust in his voice as he looked up at a red and black biplane sailing above the landing field.

"Safety first—huh—suicide first is their slogan, I'd say," added Babe Crawford sarcastically as he shaded his eyes against the sun, and from the rear doorway of the Fullerton Airplane Factory gazed into the blue dome of the heavens that arched above the broad green expanse of the Ovington Airfield in New Jersey.

"That's just it—suicide is the word and Tinker Muir is a fool for going up in that old plane with Maul. He's taking long chances with his life I'll tell the world," muttered Dan England, a third member of the group of boys who stood in the doorway and watched the brilliantly painted Jenny from the Graham Flying School, swooping and zooming in wild abandon above the field.

"They are both taking chances in more ways than one," said Don Craig significantly. Then he added, "Lieutenant Graham is away again—I heard him say he was going down to Philadelphia on some special business and would not be back until tomorrow. I'll bet a plugged nickel Maul has taken advantage of his absence and has that Jenny out without permission. He's the kind of a chap who would wait until the boss was away, then take the plane out for a hop. He's one of those joy riders who brings grief to himself and a lot of other people with his sneaking ways. As a matter of fact, I happen to know that he has

had that Jenny out without Graham's permission several times while the lieutenant has been away."

"And that's just the time when things happen; when you do something on the sly that way. Those fellows are sure due for a crash. Look at 'em! Every time they bank the old thing she side-slips about a hundred feet, and I can almost see the wings tremble under the strain," said Babe Crawford.

"I'll say so," echoed Don. "Those Jennies are old war machines—built in 1915—think of that! A fellow wouldn't take many chances in a thirteen-year-old automobile, and yet those chaps at the flying school risk their lives, and the lives of others in an obsolete old bus that is due for a crack-up any time. It's criminal. These flying schools should be investigated and outfits like Graham's closed up. Fellows who fall for their bunk advertisements about 'learning to fly in six weeks,' 'earn money by being an aviator,' and such, don't realize what

chances they are taking. It is the dirty accidents that result from flying such machines that are noised all over the country and make people believe that aviation is as dangerous as ever. What's the use of Mr. Fullerton and a few others spending time and money to educate the public to the fact that flying is safe and practical, when an outfit like that Graham Flying School is allowed to operate. They do more harm to the cause of aviation with one crack-up than can be undone through months of effort by Mr. Fullerton and his friends. Just look at those fools, for instance. Gosh—a wing over—two—three—four of 'em. It's a wonder the old Jenny doesn't just fall apart."

Don became almost breathlessly silent at the gyrations of the Jenny. So did his companions. The red biplane roared its way through the sky in a series of startling maneuvers, some of them so obviously foolhardy that the three boys and the few other spectators to the flying exhibition could not

believe what they saw. Everyone at the field knew how unsafe the old Jenny was and they could not believe that anyone would attempt such sky maneuvers in her.

And it is doubtful if anyone but Paul Maul would have attempted them. Even dare-devil Lieut. Gordon Graham would have been more careful. The exhibition was that of a lunatic or an irresponsible fool and the three members of the Cloud Patrol, who worked for the Fullerton Airplane Company at Ovington Field, had long ago catalogued Paul Maul, of the Graham Flying School, in the latter class. Indeed, there was little love lost between Maul and the three boys from Wainwright, Nevada, who were spending their summer at the New Jersey airport. And if Maul hoped to inspire their admiration by his foolhardy flight in the Jenny, and all his wild sky maneuvers he was greatly mistaken, for instead of admiring his daring, Don Craig and his two companions could only view his stunt-

ing with a mixture of disgust and fear for his safety and the safety of his younger companion, Tinker Muir.

How the discarded old Army plane ever held together under the strain it was subjected to was a miracle to Don Craig and his two friends, for Maul put the craft through rolls and spins that might have made even a newer and stronger machine crack under the strain.

Maul would start the plane climbing until he got it up to two thousand feet or higher. Then he would open up the engine on a straight-away flight across the sky until it had attained terrific speed, when suddenly he would pitch the thing into a series of barrel-rolls and wing-overs, or inside loops that would always terminate in a zoom downward toward the black and white pylon at the side of the field around which he would bank and side-slip at terrific speed, after the fashion of a racing pilot making a turn.

This in itself was bad business where a ship as old as the one he was driving was

concerned, for the strain on the wings and struts and every other part of the ship was tremendous. As the Jenny hissed around the pylon the three boys watching it could see the wings fairly tremble under the pressure and they realized that it would take very little extra tension to cause some of the strut-wires to snap.

"He'll get it one of these times—those old wings will collapse and he'll crash in a heap. I wouldn't try that stunt in a Jenny for a thousand dollars," said Dan England.

"I have never tried it even in a good machine. Garry Foster says when you make a back and sideslip around a pylon that way the centrifugal force of the swing almost pulls your eyes out of their sockets—he says you can feel the whole inside machinery of you just move out of place and settle back again, and if it does that to the pilot think what it must do to the machine itself," said Babe Crawford.

"Yeah, it's some pull all right. It's a bad stunt and they have outlawed it in racing,"

said Don. Then he added: "But I'd like to try it at that. Must be a great thrill, sliding through the air that way. I'll bet—sa-a-ay—look! The dickens! There you are! I knew it! Something's gone wrong with the Jenny! Stabilizer wire is busted, I'll bet a doughnut. Look how she's wabbling in the air! He can't straighten her out! Look! He's got to come down! He's coming down! He'll drop into a tail spin! No, he straightened her a little! But he's coming down! He'll crash! He'll—Jiminy crickets—"

All three boys uttered involuntary exclamations of fear and sensed all that was likely to happen to the ship and its occupants.

Coming out of one of his madly tearing banks and sideslips around the pylon Maul had attempted to right the machine and straighten her out on even keel once more. But the strain was far too much for the old bus to stand, and the three boys saw one of the stabilizing planes suddenly flop

limply; at the same time the Jenny listed treacherously. They could see Maul struggling frantically with the control stick to right her and get her nose in the air, to climb a little higher, so that he could have room and time to make a good landing, for the Jenny was hardly a hundred and fifty feet off the ground.

But he struggled to no avail. He could do nothing with the crippled plane. The whole thing began to wabble perilously in the air. Then suddenly it started downward, fortunately almost on even keel.

How long it would stay that was a question. Don and his companions knew if it listed one way or another as it hit the ground, the old machine would pile up into a bunch of junk and Maul and little Tinker Muir would be killed.

Don had seen one or two fatal wrecks in his day. Unbidden pictures of them leaped to his mind. He shuddered. Would Paul Maul and Tinker Muir be carried out of the wreckage of the Jenny the hideously

twisted and mangled remains of human beings he had seen lifted from other wrecks? Poor Tinker Muir. He was a good kid, and if he wasn't such a young fool as to team up with and imitate Paul Maul—well, he wouldn't be in this predicament now. Maul was different. He was older and should know the risk he was taking. If they crashed and were killed it would be all Maul's fault.

Such were the thoughts that flashed through Don Craig's mind, as he and his companions with several other horrified spectators started running across the field toward the point where the Jenny was crashing.

Maul was still struggling with the controls trying to keep the machine's wings even as it dropped. He had shut off the motor, either by accident or design. His one effort now was concentrated on keeping the Jenny on as even keel as possible so that it would strike the ground right side up and on its landing gear. They might

have one chance in a hundred to taxi to a safe stop if he could keep level a few seconds longer.

But despite his efforts the plane tilted more and more as it descended. It was scarcely fifty feet from the ground. Now twenty-five. Now ten. One side was far down. It would strike the ground first. Don knew that a crack-up was imminent—unavoidable. The tip of that down-dropping wing would touch the ground before the landing gear did, and the Jenny would trip and turn over. And traveling at seventy or eighty miles an hour Don did not dare to think of the consequences.

Crash!

The boys heard the rending of timber and fabric as in a cloud of dust the Jenny struck, skidded, tripped, nosed over and came to a sudden stop. But even as the dust boiled upward and Don saw one wing standing high in the air he realized with a sense of relief that it was not half as bad a crack-up as it might have been.

Still it was bad enough. Don wondered, with pounding heart, what had happened to Maul and Tinker Muir. Were they both pinned down under the hot engine? Had their brains been dashed out against the cock-pit cowling? Or were they lying there in the wreckage suffering with broken and twisted limbs?

He was soon to know, for fleeter of foot than Dan or Babe or any of the rest running toward the wreck, he was the first to reach the cracked-up Jenny. Frantically he began to pull apart broken sections. But even as he reached the tilted cock-pit he saw Maul, his face pasty and streaked with blood from a cut on his forehead, climbing out on unsteady legs. In the rear cock-pit, huddled in a frightened heap, crouched Tinker Muir, scared white but happily uninjured save for a cut on the back of his hand.

With a sense of relief Don reached over the cowling and hooked his hands under Tinker's arms, half lifting and half drag-

ging the smaller boy out of the wreck and standing him on his feet. Both Maul and Tinker were speechless with fright for a moment as they stared at each other, then at the shattered machine.

"Gee, we're lucky," exclaimed Tinker with a nervous tremble in his voice.

"Lucky!" exclaimed Maul. "Do you call it lucky to have a crack-up like that. I—"

"It was coming to you, Maul. Of all the fool things to do, stunting in a thirteen-year-old Jenny is about the foolest. How could you expect to do anything but pile up?" demanded Don, incensed now that the crisis had passed and tragedy had been averted.

Maul turned on Don suddenly, his eyes blazing.

"You mind your own business. This isn't any of your affairs," he snarled.

Don stared at him coldly for a moment. Then in a hard voice he answered.

"Don't you believe it isn't my affair. I'm interested in safe aviation and let me tell

you, fool flying in old machines such as you have been doing isn't helping the cause of aviation one bit. If Lieutenant Graham only—"

At the mention of Graham's name Paul Maul's face went a trifle white for a moment, then flared red, as he took a quick, menacing step toward Don.

"You shut your trap about Lieutenant Graham, and don't you dare tell him about this crash—understand. If you do I'll beat you up so your own mother wouldn't know you," he threatened as he shook a clenched fist within an inch of Don Craig's nose.

Maul's anger showed in the fire that blazed in his dark eyes, and the color that flamed in his cheeks and his drawn and corded neck. But it did not frighten Don Craig for a moment.

Don smiled coldly and, reaching up, grasped Maul's clenched fist and shoved it away from his face.

"Don't wave that dirty paw in front of

my nose, Maul. It annoys me, and doesn't scare me a little bit. Don't worry, I won't tell Lieutenant Graham about the crash. If he didn't know you had the machine up he'll never learn it from me. I'm no tattle-tale. But I don't see how he can help knowing about the whole affair when he gets a look at the Jenny."

His inability to scare Don Craig, along with the calmly confident way Don talked back to him, took Maul's temper down considerably. He dropped his hands to his side and backed away a little, still glaring at the scout.

"Don't you worry about the Jenny. It isn't cracked-up so bad we can't fix it. That's our business. Just you keep your mouth shut and stay up at the factory where you belong, see."

Then turning to his smaller companion, who stood just behind him watching the scene with tense interest, he directed:

"Tinker, go get Pete Harding and a couple of other fellows. Bring the truck too,

so we can cart this bus into the hangar before the whole world knows we had a crack-up. It isn't smashed so bad we can't put it in shape in a day or two—hurry."

And Tinker, with an understanding nod, turned and ran down toward the flying-school hangar while Don and his two companions, and the several others who had come down the field to look at the crack-up, all realizing that Maul did not want their assistance, started back toward the Fullerton factory.

CHAPTER II

THERE was little love lost between the members of the Cloud Patrol and Paul Maul and Tinker Muir who worked at the Graham Flying School. Maul and Tinker, who were from the town of Ovington, about two miles south of the field, looked upon them as interlopers, for two reasons. First of all they were not town boys. They were from the west, having come to Ovington to take summer jobs as grease monkeys for former Lieut. Harvey Harmon, the Fullerton test pilot. They had secured the positions through the efforts of their Scoutmaster Garry Foster, who had been an Air Corps buddy of Lieutenant Harmon.

By becoming assistants to Mr. Harmon, Don and his companions were filling the jobs that Maul and Tinker Muir had had,

for before Harmon was appointed test pilot for the Fullerton Company, Lieut. Gordon Graham had occupied that position and Maul and Muir had been his grease monkeys. But Graham had managed to incur the displeasure of Mr. G. K. Fullerton, the president of the company, through his persistent recklessness, and had been dismissed, Maul and Muir with him. Mr. Fullerton had become a leader in the movement to educate the public to the use of airplanes for transportation purposes, and one of his first efforts in the campaign was to emphasize the safety of flying.

He found himself considerably handicapped in this respect as long as he had Graham as test pilot, for Graham was a war aviator of the old school—a reckless daredevil who took all sorts of chances and depended often entirely upon good luck to get him out of difficulties. Graham had more crack-ups and bad accidents through foolhardy flying than any other man at Ovington Field. Mr. Fullerton warned him

repeatedly about his carelessness and recklessness, but it appeared to make no impression upon him.

Graham, who was naturally a very likeable fellow in spite of his recklessness, piqued by his discharge, promptly started the Graham Flying School, buying several old Curtis Jenny planes that had been discarded by the Army, and erecting his hangar at the upper end of Ovington Field. And of course he employed his former grease monkeys as his assistants.

This flying school soon became a thorn in the side of Mr. Fullerton and others associated with him in the campaign for the safety of the air, for in flying the old Jennies, and taking up passengers or student flyers, at three dollars each, Graham was constantly risking his life and the lives of others. Indeed, Graham had a number of crack-ups in the Jennies, some of them of a rather serious, though happily not of a fatal nature.

Mr. Fullerton tried to have the school

closed up or disfranchised, and denied a place at the Ovington Field. But he did not succeed. In the first place Graham was a friend of Nathan Sheldon, who owned the field and leased the Fullerton Company and others the privilege of using it. It was a public field and there was no way that Graham could be kept from using it if the owner was willing to let him remain there. And this Mr. Sheldon was anxious to do for he wanted to make his field one of the most popular airports in the east and the more planes he had using it the better. Already, besides the buildings of the Fullerton Company, the Wright Engine Company had established a public hangar and service there, while several other air craft companies maintained private hangars, and still others used the three big public hangars that Mr. Sheldon had erected on the field. There was a post-office building there, for the Government made the field as an air mail stop, and it was well equipped with a weather bureau, a wind indicator station,

night beacons, and landing flares, and everything else that went to make it a perfect field.

In fact it was such an excellent airport that it had lately been selected for the first time as the scene of the annual Speed Climb Contest and the start of the International Reliability Races by the International Air Craft Association, thus making it the center of aviation interest of the nation that particular summer at least.

Don and the two members of the Cloud Patrol had heard a lot about Ovington Field in the west but they never fully realized what a popular and well-equipped airport it was until they arrived there soon after school closed in June to begin their activities as grease monkeys under Lieutenant Harmon. For the first few days they spent every hour they could going through the various buildings and inspecting the variety of aircraft coming and going or laying over for repairs at the airport. They were not long in locating the Graham Flying School

at the far end of the field, and when they saw the equipment there and learned that the Jennies were used for student flyers they marveled that such an institution, with its obsolete ships was permitted to operate at such an up-to-date field. It was at the flying school that they met Maul and little Tinker Muir the second day after their arrival at the field, and this first meeting was a decidedly unfortunate one.

To save expense, and time as well, since the nearest place they could obtain rooms was in the big town of Ovington, more than two miles away, Don and his two companions had brought their camping equipment east with them in their Ford, and with the permission of Mr. Fullerton and Mr. Sheldon established a camp in a little patch of scrub-oaks beside a stream beyond the south end of the field. It was not an elaborate camp, for the boys had brought but a single Sibley Army tent and a portable camp cook-stove. But with their collapsible Army cots, and their scout mess-kits they contrived to

set up a very comfortable establishment. It was all the home they wanted for the summer, and probably a more attractive place than they suspected, for no sooner had they put their camp to rights than they had a visitor in the person of a big police dog who came wandering down the bank of the little stream until he reached the tent. Here he paused and looked the boys over with his big, soft, inquisitive eyes, then ignoring them, walked majestically inside the tent, inspected it thoroughly with many sniffs of his black nose, and, evidently deciding he liked it, crawled under one of the cots and lay down.

"Well what do you think of his majesty?" exclaimed Babe Crawford looking in at the door. "He thinks this tent was put up especially for him."

"He's a fine old fellow, but he's covered with mud and stuck full of briars. I wonder who he belongs to?" observed Dan.

"Us, I guess from the way he has adopted us. Come here, pup!" said Don.

The police dog wagged his heavy tail, now matted with burrs, and obeyed Don's summons, looking up into his face trustfully as he approached.

"Why, he's a fine dog," said Don. "A little old but a peach. He's wandered a long way from home too. Look how his pads are all worn and cut. Let's comb him out and fix him up. If he sticks with us we'll keep him. If he wanders off again we'll conclude he's gone home."

"I hope he stays. What will we call him," queried Babe.

"Lindbergh, Lindy for short," suggested Don as he began to pick the burrs out of the grizzled coat.

Lindy evidently liked his new name and his new masters for he stayed with them. The boys combed him and fed him and left him in camp when they went down to the air-field, fully expecting that he would be gone when they returned. But he was there when they got back ready to greet them with dignified enthusiasm and they were

all pleased to see him. Nor did he seem much interested in leaving camp, except when the boys coaxed him to go along with them.

Unfortunately they took Lindy along with them the afternoon they made their first visit to the other end of the field to look over the flying schools. They did not know Lieutenant Graham nor had they been told of Graham's pet superstition which concerned two tailless Manx cats, one white and the other black, and for obvious reasons called Port and Starboard. These cats stayed at the flying-school hangar and it was said that the former Army flyer when he was the Fullerton test pilot always took either one or the other or both of them up in a new machine whenever he tested it out. Some said he took them up for the luck they brought him. Others said he always watched the cats whenever he put them into a new machine. If they curled up comfortably and went to sleep he felt that the machine was safe. If they appeared rest-

less and ill at ease he concluded that their feline instinct warned them that the machine was unsafe, and he always had the craft reinspected before taking it up.

They were called Graham's lucky cats, but certainly they were far from lucky the day Don and his companions, followed by Lindy, visited the flying school. The boys had no more than entered the hangar, and begun looking over the old Jennies when Lindy spotted the cats in a far corner of the building. Cats were just cats, and things to be exterminated to the police dog, and he promptly took after them. Followed a wild scramble in the hangar with the two fierce-eyed, and bristling cats yowling and spitting as they dashed about the building, with the yelping Lindy in full pursuit, and Don and his companions hot on the dog's trail, trying to catch him. The rumpus brought Maul and Tinker from a little machine-shop in which they were working, and when they saw the situation they became furious.

They began to yell at the dog and throw

things at him, until in self-defense Lindy forgot the cats and turned on Maul. If the police dog had been vicious in pursuit of the cats he was savage when he leaped at the boy. Maul, somewhat of a bully, and by so much something of a coward, was scared stiff. As Lindy, with a snarl sprang at him, Maul, his face becoming chalk-like, threw up his arm, and stumbled backward, only to trip over an unused chock-block on the floor and go down on his back. Yelling wildly he rolled over and tried to struggle to his feet, only to find the police dog standing over him with yellow eyes glaring and his fangs bared.

"Take him off! Quick! He'll kill me!" screamed Maul frantically as he lay, paralyzed with fear, on the floor of the hangar, staring up into the savage countenance of Lindy. And indeed it looked for a moment as if Lindy might kill the boy, for he was the picture of anger with his mane bristling and his ears laid back. His big, dripping jaws were within inches of Maul's throat,

and Don was almost as frightened as Maul was until he managed to get a good firm grip on the loose skin of Lindy's neck and yank him back from the prostrated Maul.

Graham's grease monkey leaped to his feet, then his terror changing to anger.

"You fellows take that savage brute out of here, and don't you ever come near this place again. What are you doing here anyhow? You don't belong down here. You're those Boy Scouts that's been imported all the way from the west by that flying wonder Harvey Harmon. You get back to him and don't get untied from his apron strings and wander down in this direction again. If you do you are liable to get hurt. I'll sure kill that dog of yours if he ever comes down here again, let me tell you," he stormed.

Don, still holding the growling Lindy, looked at him coldly.

"Don't worry, we won't be down here again. We've seen all we want to see. As for killing that dog of ours, look out he don't see you first, Maul," he said with a

tantalizing grin as he turned and led Lindy out of the hangar with Dan and Babe following him.

Nor did any one of the three visit the Flying School again voluntarily.

Don and his companions had elected to camp at the lower end of the flying field. They frequently arrived at the plant long before the eight o'clock whistle blew and almost every night they stayed late, or returned to the factory after they had cooked and eaten their evening meal and cleaned up their camp.

Don's job often really required more than an eight-hour day. As the first assistant to Harvey Harmon it was his duty to see that the ships to be tested every morning by the pilot were tuned up and in proper condition to be taken out, and tested in the air.

He had to see that oil and gas had been installed in sufficient quantity for the test —that the engine was properly warmed up and that the machine was thoroughly inspected so the pilot could feel confident that

it was in the proper shape to be taken into the air. Dan and Babe were in a measure Don's assistants, but they also had work to do in the factory, such as taping struts, and doping wing surfaces and other jobs of a minor nature.

In addition to these tasks they had undertaken the job of building a rather large model of a Fullerton plane. And Don, because he was interested in the model, and because he was clever with tools too, frequently helped them after his own work was finished, staying often as late as nine o'clock in the evening before they bade the more or less grouchy night watchman Nick Conlon good night.

In fact Nick was frequently the only real reason why they did not often stay later. A queer sort of a man, short and stocky, with long arms, a bullet-shaped head, and a pair of fishy blue eyes that seemed at times to mask a very crafty disposition, Nick never seemed to like to have the boys hanging around the factory at night despite the fact

that they had Mr. Fullerton's permission to do so. He was constantly harping about things being stolen about the place and while he never blamed the boys he always warned them that if they persisted in coming into the building nights they would sooner or later be blamed for gas and oil that was being drained from some of the airplanes, and tools, and engine parts that were apparently always disappearing.

Nick hated Lindy too, with a hatred that seemed to have something more than just a dislike of dogs behind it. And Lindy always watched Nick suspiciously when he was about and growled at him when he approached any of the boys as if to warn the watchman that he was the appointed guardian of Don, Dan and Babe. Nor could the boys take to Nick, despite the fact that they tried hard to like him. Their feelings toward him, however, may have been influenced by the fact that he was the one who brought their evening sessions at the factory to an end all too soon, and sent them

away to their tent before they were ready to go.

It happened that all three of the boys were working late the night of the day that Maul had cracked-up the Jenny, for Don had a single motor ship of the pursuit type to get ready for a retest and final checking up in the morning. It was the plane that Lieutenant Harmon intended to fly in the big speed climbing contest, the date for which was fast approaching, and in the International Reliability Race which was set to follow shortly after.

A fine silver and black ship, it had been christened the *Black Hawk,* and Don and the Lieutenant were lavishing care and attention on it for the test pilot hoped to drive it to high honors for the Fullerton Company in the two big races. The boys were working industriously on the ship when Nick making his rounds of the building came into their section of the shop.

"You kids have put in a full day. It's time yuh was in yuhr tents and poundin'

yuhr ears. Come on, beat it now. I wanta turn out th' lights in this shop, an' bed the place down for th' night," he told them.

"Aw forget it, Nick," protested Don. "Give us just a little longer. Another half hour and—"

Don was interrupted by a sudden outburst of barks and shrill cat squalling from the direction of the flying-school hangar. A dog and an alley full of cats seemed to be having an argument.

"It's Lindy. He's down there after Lieutenant Graham's cats again. I didn't see him slip out, did you fellows? It sounds as if he had both of them by the back of the neck," exclaimed Dan.

All three boys forgot about Nick and their work and, bursting out of the factory, on a run they started down the field toward the noise of the cat-and-dog fight. But before Don or his companions reached the hangar of the flying school one of the big double doors swung open suddenly to emit a broad shaft of light. And limned against

it was Lindy in a wild mix-up with the two cats.

The figure of Paul Maul, a big wrench in his hand, stood silhouetted in the doorway for a moment as he took in the situation. Then suddenly with an exclamation of anger he leaped out into the night and dashed swiftly toward the busily engaged police dog.

"Get out of here, you blamed hound, or I'll brain you," he yelled.

And suiting actions to words he swung the heavy wrench upward and brought it down with terrific force on Lindy's head.

Don, but a few yards away, saw the weapon gleam in the lamplight before it descended, and with a shout of protest he leaped forward to prevent the blow. But he was too late. Even as he plunged into the shaft of light he heard the implement connect with the dog's head with the very unpleasant sound of metal biting through flesh to the bone and he saw poor Lindy drop in a nerve-convulsed heap at Maul's

feet while the two cats, with backs arched, scampered into the hangar.

"You dirty brute," yelled Don fiercely as he saw the condition of Lindy. "Hitting a dog with a thing like that is—is—why it's murder—you've killed him."

"I hope I have. Maybe he'll know enough to leave our mascots alone now. I owed him that anyhow for trying to tear my throat out the other day. And sa-a-ay what are you two apron-string aviators doing around here this time of night anyhow? Didn't I warn you to keep away? You are spying on me—that's what you are doing, you dirty, sneaking pups. Going to tell Lieutenant Graham all you saw, aren't you? Why blast your snooping hides, for two pins I'd bust this wrench over your heads too. I will, by jiminy, if you don't get out of here. I'll crown—"

Maul took a quick step toward Don and swung the wrench and Don could see by the anger that blazed in his eyes that he meant to hit him with it. Once more the ugly

weapon gleamed in the lamplight ready to crash downward. But it never descended, at least not in the arc Maul intended it to descend, for Don Craig, thoroughly incensed at the way Maul had treated Lindy, and angry too at being threatened by the boy from the flying school, hurled himself through the air in a flying tackle full at this chap who hated him.

Their bodies met with a muffled thud and grunts. The force of Don's attack and the violence of his lunge as he locked his arms about Maul's body completely overbalanced him. The wrench went spinning from Maul's upraised hand and clutching and grasping at Don's body he staggered backward two short steps before he fell heavily with Don on top of him.

Footsteps sounded in the darkness close at hand and a voice Don recognized as that of Lieutenant Graham shouted:

"Here! Here! What does this mean?"

The pilot of the flying school stepped into

"I GOT A TRACTOR WHAT U'LL YANK YEW OUTA THERE QUICKER 'EN SCAT."

The Pilot of the Cloud Patrol.

the shaft of light from the open hangar door.

Maul, frightened, leaped to his feet. Don unclenched his fists and turning faced the aviator, stepping back a pace as he did so to be between Dan and Babe, who had been watching the encounter with tense interest.

"I was giving Maul a trouncing for hitting our police dog with a wrench," said Don simply.

"Maul? Hit your dog? Get up, Maul. How did this all come about, anyhow? What are you doing here at the field this time of night. I—"

Graham stopped talking as he glanced through the hangar door at the cracked-up Jenny. Then without a word he turned a cold eye on Maul, who was stumbling to his feet still holding his hand to his jaw.

"I see," he said coldly. "You had the Jenny out without my permission and cracked it up. I'm not surprised. I suspected you took the machines out when I

wasn't here. Trying to patch up the break before I got back from Philadelphia, were you? That's why you are here until this time of night. Good thing I came down to the hangar when I did. I just got in from Philadelphia and I didn't intend to stop at the field, but I had to get some important papers. I'm glad now that I did, Maul. I've caught you red-handed. You are fired. Understand?"

"Fired?" exclaimed Maul as if he could not believe his ears.

"Fired," confirmed Graham coldly.

Maul was silent for a moment. Then he stammered:

"Aw, Mr. Graham, I wasn't the only one in the crack-up. Tinker was with me."

"Tinker? I suppose so. But I know you two well enough to know Tinker didn't propose the joy ride. Tinker would be a good kid if he didn't ape you so much. You are a bad influence on that boy. But I'll separate you two this time. You are discharged and don't you show your face

around here any more. I can't have a boy around my place who sneaks joy rides as you do. You are through. Get your working duds out of the hangar. As for Tinker, I'll give him a good talking to, and if he doesn't toe the chalk mark hereafter, I'll fire him also. Where is he?"

"Home. He was too scared to come down and help me patch up the Jenny," mumbled Maul. Then he blurted, "Aw-gee-I-I-say—give me another chance, will you, Mr. Graham?"

"No, sir; not any. You have sneaked too many joy rides. Get your duds and clear out," said the aviator firmly, as he turned toward the hangar.

Sheepishly, with head hanging, Maul followed Graham into the hangar. A moment later he emerged again with a bundle of greasy working clothes under his arm, while the pilot remained inside. And as Maul passed Don and his two companions, who were bending over the slowly reviving Lindy, he muttered:

"I know how Graham came to come down to the field. You dirty skunks tipped him off that I smashed up the Jenny and he came down and caught me with the plane only half repaired. I'd have had it all fixed up by morning, and he wouldn't have known the difference. But you sneaks snitched on me. I'll fix you all for it—you wait and see—and I'll give you the beating of your life when I catch you alone, Craig, don't forget it."

"I'll be at home any time you want to call, Maul, don't worry about that," said Don. Then he added, "But you'd better get it out of your head that we had anything to do with your getting caught by Lieutenant Graham. It was your hard luck that he walked in on you that way."

Don gathered the limp form of the police dog in his arms as he spoke, and started across the flying field through the darkness toward the little patch of woods in which their camp was located, while Dan and Babe followed.

CHAPTER III

LINDY, the police dog, was not as badly hurt as Don and his companions feared. True, he had an ugly cut on his head, between his big upstanding ears, and the wound made him ill and feverish for several days after the incident. But he responded to the careful treatment the three boys lavished on him and in a few days he was about again, as chipper as ever.

Don gave little thought to Maul, and his threats to get even with him and give him a trouncing. For one thing he felt thoroughly capable of taking care of himself in such an emergency, and for another he had too many other things on his mind. His chief concern was Harmon's racing plane, the *Black Hawk,* which he and the pilot were still working over diligently, testing,

tuning, and retesting to bring it up to perfection for the maneuvers.

When Don thought of Maul at all it was with a feeling of unhappiness. He was sorry for him, despite the fact that he was a pugnacious, ill-tempered bully. There was no doubt that the loss of his job at the flying school had been a blow to him. Don knew how badly he would have felt had he, through some chain of circumstances, lost his job with Lieutenant Harmon.

Dismissed from the flying school, Maul did not disappear from the flying field. On the contrary, he was more conspicuous about the place than ever, lounging about one hangar or another, killing time by chatting with the various mechanics and a group of Ovington boys who hung out at the field, or doing odd jobs and errands for anyone and everyone about the place. In particular did he hang about the three big public hangars just below the Wright engine-repair shop, where activities were increasing daily, with new planes coming in to prepare

for the races. Don saw him there almost every time he went out on the field or passed down the line of hangars to go to the Wright machine shop, as he frequently had to.

On such occasions Maul would scowl at him, and make some remarks about Harmon's apron-string aviators to whomever he might be with at the moment. And some of these remarks were loud enough for Don to hear, and of a very unpleasant nature. But that was as far apparently as Maul had the courage to go.

Tinker Muir, still employed at the flying school, was as friendly with Maul as ever, despite the fact that Lieutenant Graham did not want him associating with the older and bigger boy. Don often saw Tinker in Maul's company. He seemed much attached to Maul and found the opportunity to be with him so much that Don rather felt that the younger boy must be neglecting his work at the flying school. And he knew that if Lieutenant Graham found out that he still clung to Maul he would be discharged.

"The little chump," he told Babe Crawford one day, after they had both seen Tinker lounging with Maul and some other Ovington boys in the sunlight behind one of the three public hangars which was their favorite hangout, "Maul got him into trouble once before and nearly killed him in that Jenny crack-up. I can't see why he doesn't shake that fellow for good and all. Graham will fire him sure if he finds out he's still chumming with him."

"He seems very much attached to Maul —reminds me of a dog and his master. I'll bet that youngster would do anything Maul told him to do without question. It's too bad, too, because Tinker seems like a mighty good kid, when he is away from Maul," said Babe.

"What Tinker needs is a good talking to," said Don thoughtfully.

"Talking to—shucks. Tinker Muir is old enough to know that Maul is a big, reckless fool, and that if he follows in his footsteps he'll only get into trouble. He's had a good

object lesson in the fact that Maul has been fired. Seems to me that should wake him up. He knows he should not hang out with Maul and those other chaps pitching pennies and smoking cigarets behind the hangars."

"Yes, he should know better, but then some of us can't see things clearly until they are pointed out to us. I figure Tinker looks upon Maul as a regular hero because he is bigger and stronger and more reckless. He doesn't see his shortcomings and he doesn't realize that associating with him and those other boys is liable to get him into trouble and lose his job for him too. I like little Tinker and some day I'm going to have a talk with him and see if I can't wake him up," concluded Don.

He kept that promise in mind and for several days he had a sharp eye out for Tinker in the hope of getting him alone somewhere so that he could have a chat with him. But almost a week slipped by before he got an opportunity to see the younger boy. It hap-

pened that he had to go down to the Wright machine shop for a lot of new gaskets for the cyclone motor of the *Black Hawk,* for he and Lieutenant Harmon, with the assistance of Don and Babe and two expert mechanics from the Wright Engine Company, were giving the racing-ship a final overhauling from engine to rudder before the big speed climb which was now but two days off.

He was on his way out when he discovered Tinker coming down the graveled drive in front of the line of hangars. Don waited a moment, timing himself so that he would cross Tinker's path at about the second hangar. He thought that he might persuade Tinker to walk back to the factory with him, so that they could talk on the way. After a few seconds delay Don started forward, but he had gone hardly ten paces before he saw that he was not destined to meet Tinker. Instead of coming on down past the second hangar Tinker suddenly turned into the open space between the

first and second hangar and disappeared.

A little disappointed, Don continued on his way up along the line of low-roofed buildings, wondering vaguely why Tinker had turned in between the two structures. But as he approached the front of the second hangar he knew the reason. From just around the corner of the building he heard snatches of a subdued conversation. There was something hushed and secretive about the voices. Don would have passed across the front of the opening between the two buildings without a glance in the direction of the two boys had not a snatch of their conversation come to his ears very distinctly. Maul was talking:

"—that's great news, Tinker. That will fix the *Black Hawk's* chances all right, all right. I sure don't want to see Harmon and that Fullerton ship win—"

"Shus-s-s-s," interrupted Tinker. "Don't you say a word about it. Lieutenant Graham—"

Tinker stopped suddenly as Don's foot-

steps crunching on the gravel came to his ears. Both boys looked up just as Don stepped past the entrance to the space between the buildings.

Don could not help glancing into the alley then, and of course he looked full into the startled and guilty countenances of both Maul and Tinker Muir. For a moment their eyes met, then suddenly Tinker turned his back on Don and began talking furiously about something that he happened to think of at the moment, while Maul glared at Don for fully ten seconds before he turned and walked beside Tinker down the alleyway between the hangars.

There was something so suspicious about the whole thing, and Maul and Muir had looked so guilty that instantly grave forebodings leaped to Don's mind.

"'That will fix the *Black Hawk's* chances.' Maul said it. I wonder what he meant? Of course, neither he nor Muir wants to see us win the speed climb on Friday nor the Reliability next week. Do you

suppose they are up to something—that there is some dirty work afoot to keep the *Black Hawk* out of the races? Maybe those two fool kids are planning to get revenge on me, and on Lieutenant Harmon and the Fullerton Company by trying something dishonest. Maybe Muir is trying to win Graham's favor by pulling some crooked work on Harvey Harmon. But that seems ridiculous. In the first place Graham has no plane to fly in the two big races, and in the second place he certainly never would be a party to any crooked work. He isn't that kind. But what could Maul have meant by his remark?"

Now and then during the day Don thought of the two boys and the brief part of their conversation he had overheard, and he could not help but wonder and worry about it a little. But later in the day it passed from his mind entirely for he became too busily engaged in the work on the *Black Hawk* to allow any thoughts to fill his mind.

He with Dan and Babe and the two

Wright mechanics, Brackett and Simpson, were hard at the job of overhauling the *Black Hawk's* motor, when Lieutenant Harmon, who had been absent from the factory all morning, came into the hangar in which the planes to be tested were housed. The pilot looked a little worried as he approached them and ran a critical eye over the work they were doing. In perfunctory sort of a way he asked how things were going.

"Fine," said Brackett, the head mechanic from the Wright shop. "We'll have her running as sweet as honey when we get her put together again. That's one fine engine you have in this ship, and if you can't do almost anything you want with the plane when you get into the air it sure won't be the motor's fault."

"Good. That's what I like to hear," said Lieutenant Harmon. Then looking at Don he beckoned him away from the work with a nod of his head and asked him to join him

outside the hangar because he had something important to say to him. Don, wondering what his chief wanted of him, wiped his oil-grimed hands on a piece of waste, and walked out to join Harmon.

"Don, how many hours have you had in the air?" was the Lieutenant's first query.

"About fifty all told, and I've done some solo work, a lot of it really. In a De Havilland."

"Fine," mused the Lieutenant as he gazed off across the field thoughtfully.

Don wondered what was to follow. He sensed that the pilot had something important on his mind. He waited patiently, almost expectantly.

"How would you like to fly in the *Black Hawk* as assistant pilot in the speed climb day after to-morrow and in the Reliability race next week?" queried Mr. Harmon, presently.

"How would I like to!" exclaimed Don, incredulously. "Gosh, you might just as

well asked me how I would like to have about a million dollars. Why? Is there any chance, sir?"

"I think there is, Don. Mr. Fullerton wanted me to take his nephew, Keen Fullerton, up with me as assistant pilot. But Keen is still in the Air Corps and I learned this morning that he has just received Army orders to report to Kelly Field in Texas day after to-morrow, the day of the race. He has already started South from Washington, where he has been stationed. He thought he could get the time off to fly with me, but his plans have gone wrong, and at the last minute I'm left without an assistant pilot unless I take you."

"Oh, just give me the chance—take me along, will you please?" exclaimed Don, so earnestly that Lieutenant Harmon looked at him and smiled good naturedly.

"You really want to go, I can see that. All right, Don. I'll change Keen's name on the entry blank to yours. You understand what that means, don't you? It means if

anything should happen to prevent me from piloting the ship either in Friday's races or the race next week you would probably have to fly it."

"I could fly the *Black Hawk* if I had to. Of course I couldn't handle her as well as you could but there isn't a chance in the world that you will not be at the wheel."

"I hope not," said the Lieutenant with another smile. Then he added, "All right, you are the assistant pilot. I'll take you up on the test flights to-morrow, so you can see how she handles. Now get back to work and tell Brackett and Simpson to put a little speed into assembling that motor so that the ship will be tuned up and ready first thing in the morning. I'll drive in to New York and make the necessary changes in the entrance blanks," said Lieutenant Harmon as he walked off across a corner of the field to where his glistening maroon and nickel roadster was parked on the edge of a big group of cars belonging to the men employed at the Fullerton plant.

Don stood watching him go, for a moment hardly believing the good fortune that had befallen him.

"Gee, am I awake or is this a dream?" he queried, as he playfully pinched himself on the arm. Then turning, and treading with his head in the clouds, he reentered the hangar. The news was too good to keep. He had to tell Dan and Babe immediately, nor could he keep it from the mechanics, who all agreed that he was a mighty lucky fellow.

Don worked with more enthusiasm than ever for the rest of the afternoon, and Dan and Babe, because they were proud of the honor that had come to him, were just as energetic in their efforts. Brackett and Simpson worked hard too, but when the factory whistle blew at five o'clock they laid down their tools and took off their working togs.

"We're nearly finished, and a half hour's work in the morning will see us through. Just a few odds and ends to be tightened up," said Brackett to Don.

"There isn't much to be done," admitted Don. "But I think I'll stick on and finish up as much as possible. I would like to turn that old motor over to-night before I turn in, just to hear her hum. I think I'll stick on and come back after supper if it is O. K. with you fellows."

"Go to it," said Brackett with a smile. "There isn't anything still to be done that you can't do."

"We'll stick with you Don," said Dan. "But I propose we go back to camp and cook supper before we push ourselves any further. Two hours after supper will see us through, and don't forget there's a big pot of baked beans in the bean hole—been cooking all day and they should be mighty juicy by this time."

"Right-o, and I'm as hungry as a diplodocus," said Don.

"So'm I, whatever a dippy-docus is," announced Babe throwing down his tools and beginning to shed his jumper.

Lindy walked back to the shop with them

after supper, as usual, and lay down under the fuselage of the *Black Hawk* while the three boys worked at turning and locking bolts and cleaning up the motor. The job took longer than they expected, and it was half-past nine before Don pronounced the job complete.

"Doggone, but she's a beauty. I can hardly believe I'm going up in her. I've got a good mind to fill her up with gas and oil and turn over her motor just to hear her roar."

"Aw, don't do it," said Dan wearily. "That would take an hour longer. You can do it in daylight so much better."

Don had been feeling in the pockets of his jumper.

"I can't anyhow. I haven't got the key to the gas tank. Lieutenant Harmon has it. Guess we'll have to quit anyhow. Here comes Nick."

Footsteps sounded outside the hangar and the night watchman entered. He looked at the boys with a surly expression, then at the

ship, and the police dog underneath it. Lindy looked up at him too, and just the suggestion of a growl rumbled in the dog's throat as he watched Conlon.

"Doncha growl at me, yuh purp," said Nick none too pleasantly. Then he turned to Don.

" 'Bout time you fellows was quittin' ain't it?" he asked.

"Yep. Just finished. We're going home now, so you can lock up, Nick," said Don.

"Good enough. Did you fill her with oil and gas?" he asked nodding his head toward the *Black Hawk*.

"No. I haven't the keys to the pump or oil room," answered Don. Then he questioned, "Why?"

Nick grunted.

"Oh nothin'. Kinda like to be extra careful 'bout fires and such," he said as he began to turn out the lights.

Don, and his companions, with the faithful Lindy trailing them, went back to their tent and to bed, and strangely enough Don

dropped off to a dreamless sleep despite the fact that he was all excited about the test flight he was to take in the *Black Hawk* in the morning.

Morning came and the boys started for the factory, arriving there just before the eight o'clock whistle blew.

Early as they were, Don found Lieutenant Harmon there before them. He was inside the hangar looking at the *Black Hawk*.

"Very trim and pretty. Have you tested out the motor?" he asked Don.

"Not yet. I didn't have the keys to the oil and gas room. You have them," answered Don.

"That's right. Here they are. And speaking of oil and gas I want to warn you fellows to be extra careful. There is a lot of oil and gas, tools and other things being stolen from the public hangars down the line. The thieves have even taken motor parts. They broke into hangar number one last night and drained the gas and oil tanks of every plane in there, and stole some spark

plugs and two carburetors for the Pauling and V.D. planes that are there for to-morrow's races. They nearly ruined the V.D. plane, and it's a question whether Sutton and Struthers can get the ship in shape for the race to-morrow. It has a Rolls-Royce engine, English you know, and it's hard to get parts in this country. We had better keep a sharp watch over the *Black Hawk.*"

For a moment the full significance of what Lieutenant Harmon told him did not dawn on Don Craig, but when he suddenly remembered that the space between the first and second hangar was the favorite hang-out of Paul Maul, a rather unpleasant thought leaped to his mind. Could Maul have had anything to do with the thievery? Maul was out of work now and constantly hanging around the field and the public hangars. Could he have fallen quite so low as to steal gas and oil and machine parts from the planes? There was a fine opportunity to steal stuff at Ovington Field just then, for a score or more of fine big racing

planes, specially built machines that had come in for the races, were housed in those hangars, and not particularly well guarded.

But Maul did not seem like quite the type of fellow who would stoop as low as that. Don was about to dismiss these suspicious thoughts about Maul from his mind, when he suddenly recalled the meeting of Tinker Muir and Paul Maul at the second hangar the day before. The snatch of conversation that he had heard leaped to his mind again. "That will fix the *Black Hawk's* chances," Maul had said. In the light of what had happened to the Pauling and the V.D. plane, and Lieutenant Harmon's warning to guard the *Black Hawk* carefully, that sentence had sinister significance now.

A half-hour of testing, tuning and testing of the cyclone engine by Brackett and Simpson was sufficient to pronounce the ship in fine shape, and meanwhile Lieutenant Harmon and Don were putting on their leather flying clothes, along with their helmets and

goggles and their parachute packs, preparatory to the trial hop.

Ten minutes later they were ready. Lieutenant Harmon climbed into the machine first, and Don, smiling to Dan and Babe, followed. Brackett whirled the propeller and let go, the spark caught, and the motor began grumbling first lazily, then with increased violence until it thundered. Then by careful adjustment of spark and choke Lieutenant Harmon nursed it into a steady, rhythmical roar, meanwhile cocking his ear to the motor's song and listening intently.

"Beautiful. Smooth as can be. If we can't do anything that has ever been done in the air, and a lot more, with this bus, I'll resign as pilot," shouted the Lieutenant to Don who sat in the dual-control seat in front of him.

Don shouted his agreement and smiled happily as he grasped the vertical joy-stick wheel in front of him, and that was the last that was said for an hour or longer, for

Lieutenant Harmon gradually accelerated the motor by giving it gas until the propeller became a blur in front of the fuselage, and a moment later they were roaring their way across the field to take gracefully to the air and climb swiftly upward.

What a wonderful ship the *Black Hawk* was! Don had never ridden behind so much power nor seen a craft that handled so easily and quickly. It was a wonder ship, there was no doubting that. In a breath it seemed, the black and silver bird had climbed to the two-thousand-foot level, and a few seconds later the altimeter read three thousand. Lieutenant Harmon climbed another thousand before he leveled off, and began putting the ship through some interesting maneuvers. Don had done a little stunting before, but nothing to what the former Army flyer did in the *Black Hawk*. Rolls, wing-over, spins, turns and loops followed in such quick succession that Don had difficulty in keeping track of all the maneuvers. It was exhilarating, though, even if it

did take Don's breath at times, and the leader of the Cloud Patrol got a good idea of how easily an expert pilot can handle a fast machine in the air. He had flown alone and with Garry Frost many times, but Garry was not the experienced aviator that Harmon was.

Gradually the air space above the field became crowded as more ships came up to try out their engines the day before the race. Practically the whole field that was expected to compete in the maneuvers was sky-scraping and cloud-dodging by ten o'clock in the morning, and it was a pretty sight to see the big, bird-like things skimming and swooping and zooming everywhere. Don picked out first one after another. There was the fast little Etoe, monoplane, gay in its blue and gold paint. There was the Pom, a biplane in brilliant orange; the Fairchild and the Chillingsworth, both pure white. The Fancher in silver and blue, and the Baro in green and orange. There was the prettily varnished Spad, the Vedor-Benz, with its

varnished wood wings and dark blue body, the Cord, Marie-Antoinette, and the Pitcarn. They were all in the air at once, doing their stuff.

The *Black Hawk* had been aloft for some time, and Lieutenant Harmon had mentally catalogued a few minor adjustments that he wanted made, and was about to descend to the ground, when far off he spotted a machine coming up from the south and approaching the field. He seemed to study it for some time, then finally as it approached, he pointed to it and nodded to Don.

Don had been studying it too. It was a fast biplane as small as the *Black Hawk,* and as it approached he decided that it was a Hobson, one of the *Golden Eagle* type. It was decorated in yellow and black.

"A Hobson, isn't it?" he yelled to Lieutenant Harmon.

The pilot nodded. Then he shouted:

"Look who is at the controls."

Don looked closely and recognized Lieutenant Graham of the flying school, and an

assistant pilot he did not know. He wondered at this, for as far as he knew Graham was not supposed to have a ship in the race. Up to the day before Don had not heard of Graham's entry, nor had a Hobson been listed in the partial list of entries.

The *Golden Eagle* came down at the lower end of the field and taxied up to one of the public hangars, while Lieutenant Harmon brought the *Black Hawk* down at the Fullerton hangar. When he shut off the motor, he spoke to Don.

"Graham has put one over this time, I think, and I'm rather glad. He's got the job of flying the Hobson entry in the race, I fancy. He must have brought it up from Philadelphia. I heard he went down to Philly last night again, and that he was dickering with the Hobson Company. They must have just managed to get their entry in before the list closed. That *Golden Eagle* is a great ship. If there is one in the field we'll have to look out for, especially in the Reliability Race, it's that one. Graham has

been mighty secretive about his plans, hasn't he? He's sprung a surprise on all of us, for I understood on Saturday he wasn't flying, and that the Hobson Company would not have a good ship ready in time."

"He *has* put one over. And wouldn't he be tickled to beat out the *Black Hawk* and win both races. That would be getting revenge on Mr. Fullerton for firing him, and on you, too, for taking his job, wouldn't it?" said Don.

"That's just what is in the back of his mind, I'll bet a cookie," smiled Lieutenant Harmon. "The Hobson and Fullerton companies are close rivals, too, you know." Then he added:

"But he'll have to go some to beat the *Black Hawk,* I'm here to state."

"I'll tell the world," replied Don enthusiastically, as he followed Mr. Harmon out of the fuselage.

CHAPTER IV

Don, with the pilot and the rest of the ground crew, worked over the ship until lunch time, and were back at it again at one o'clock. At four they took the ship up again for a test spin, and when they landed Mr. Harmon pronounced it perfect.

"It's in great shape. Now don't let a single person tamper with it. Lock it up in the hangar, Don, and keep a pretty good guard over it. Don't let any of those vandals or gasoline thieves get at it, or they might ruin it. I'll caution Nick to be especially careful to-night, and if you fellows come over to the field at all this evening, just look in on it, will you? But don't waste any sleep doing it, because you'll have to feel fit for to-morrow, you know. Now so long; I'll see you in the morning," and the former

Army flyer left the plane and started toward Mr. Fullerton's office.

Don and his companions pottered around the ship until five o'clock, filling the tanks to capacity, and changing the oil. When it was all ready for the morning, they moved it into the hangar and, washing up, started for camp. Here Don broiled a steak that one of the men from the factory had brought down from town for them at noontime, along with a big apple pie. With some potatoes roasted in the hot coals and a can of tomatoes, and liberal wedges of the aforesaid pie, they had a real meal, Lindy doing justice to the steak bones and all that the boys did not eat.

The dishes washed, Don could not be thoroughly contented. The *Black Hawk* and its safety was on his mind. He hung around camp with the rest of the fellows until it began to grow dusk, then finally he spoke up.

"I haven't any reason to go down to the plant to-night, but I think I'll walk over about ten o'clock and have a look around. I

don't want any of those chaps who are stealing gas to get into our hangar. No telling what they might do to the ship."

"We'll go with you," said Dan. "Just wait a little while until I finish this story I'm reading. How about it, Babe?"

"Right-o. I'll go. We'll take Lindy," said Babe.

Dan finished the story in less than an hour, and it was just half-past nine when they started out, Lindy walking beside them with great dignity.

The field as they approached was dark and deserted. Not a light was burning anywhere save the big revolving beacon at the eastern end, and since its finger-like ray was pointed skyward it did little to dispel the heavy blackness of a starless night that overhung the place.

The boys went first to the hangar in which the *Black Hawk* was kept and had a look around. Everything seemed snug and ship-shape. They strolled down the graveled drive-way toward the public hangars,

talking in an undertone, and not really expecting to see anything of a startling nature. Their talk was of the first of the two big races that would take place next day, and they discussed the chances of first one and then another of the ships that had put in at the field.

"My private opinion, publicly expressed, and excusing myself to our valiant young aviator, Donald Craig—I'm here to state that it's going to be a close competition tomorrow. That *Golden Eagle* of the Hobson Company, which sneaked in here to-day, is some ship, and we all know Graham is some aviator, even if he is a reckless flyer. For maneuverability and climbing, the Hobson has a real reputation, and our old *Black Hawk* isn't going to have a walkaway. What I mean is, they are going both to be hot races, and not maybe."

"You are right," admitted Don. "The Hobson is a real bus. It is a wonder for fast climbing, and it is really the climbing records that they are all out for, for the

Government has its eyes on this contest, and the plane that shows the fastest climbing ability is likely to land a good Army and Navy contract. Of course, speed and reliability count a lot too, but it's climbing that means the most to—"

Don stopped talking suddenly and hissed a soft warning, at the same time freezing in his tracks. The two other boys obeyed him instantly, while Lindy took two quick steps forward, then stopping, crouched, while a soft growl rumbled in his throat. The boys could see the hair on his neck and shoulders bristle, while his tail stiffened, and every muscle in his big and powerful body tensed for action.

They had reached a concession booth just about a hundred feet away from the first of the three public hangars, and they were about to step past the building, now closed and darkened, when Don's quick eye caught the movement of two shadowy figures, slipping along the side toward the rear of the first of the three hangars. There was some-

thing stealthy about the movement of the men that marked them as marauders. Even Lindy sensed this as he glimpsed them. For the period of several seconds the three boys and the dog stood tensed and silent in the shadow of the booth Don was the first to speak, in a vibrant whisper.

"It's those dirty thieves. They are trying to break into that hangar, I'll bet anything."

"What shall we do? Call the watchman?" queried Babe breathlessly.

"If we do, they'll beat it. I'd like to catch one of them. I've got a hunch I know who they are, or at least who one of them is."

"Maul?" asked Babe.

"Maybe," said Don enigmatically. Then he gripped Dan's arm. "Look at Lindy. He's all keyed up to go. Let's—s-a-ay—I believe it is Maul, the way Lindy is acting. Look. You know how he hates him. Let's send the dog after them. He might catch one. A trained police dog is a wonder at

that sort of thing, and I think Lindy is trained. Sic 'em, ol' fellow—go get 'em—"

Lindy needed no second command. Like a flash he was off, running low like a wolf and never uttering a sound. As silently as doom itself he sped through the night straight for the first hangar, around which the stealthy figures had vanished.

"Look at him go! He'll get one of them!" muttered Don. Then as Lindy disappeared around the hangar, he hissed:

"Come on. Let's follow him. We'll know who is doing this dirty work at the field in a few seconds, I'll bet a nickel."

As the three boys leaped into a run, Lindy disappeared from their sight behind the hangar. An instant later he uttered a sharp bark, then above their own footsteps crunching on the graveled drive the boys could hear other footsteps pounding heavily. They could hear muttered exclamations of fright, too, and presently off ahead of them through the night and running straight for the rear of the Fullerton factory building

they saw three figures legging it as fast as they could travel, while a hundred yards behind them, belly to the ground and looking for all the world like a timber wolf hot on the trail of its prey, flashed the vague form of the police dog.

"Look at him go! He'll get them! He'll pull one down before they reach the factory!" exclaimed Don, swinging off after Lindy as fast as he could travel, with the two other boys behind him.

But those thieves were no laggards. Fear of that sinister tawny shape behind them lent wings to their heels, and they disappeared into the heavy shadow behind the factory building before Lindy had closed in on the last of them. But Lindy was gaining at every jump. A split second after the fugitives had disappeared behind the building, Lindy vanished into the somber blackness also. And an instant later came the loudest howling and barking and yelping the boys had ever heard the police dog utter.

The racket was accompanied by oaths and shouts of anger of someone the dog evidently had cornered and was holding at bay.

"He's got one! He's treed his coon! Come on, fellows!" yelled Don as he redoubled his speed, at the same time feeling into his hip pocket for a tiny flashlight he usually carried there.

He reached the heavy shadows behind the factory building. Just ahead of him was the dark form of Lindy prancing and barking, and alternately snapping and growling at a figure he held cornered in a doorway.

Don came to an abrupt stop as he found his flashlight, while Babe and Dan pounded up behind him.

"Now we'll see who at least one of these thieving rascals is, and turn him over to the police," he said as he pressed the button of the battery lamp and flashed its finger-like ray of white light on the figure crouching in the doorway.

But as the light split the darkness Don uttered an exclamation half of amazement and half of disappointment, for the man Lindy held prisoner in the factory doorway was the night watchman. Nick Conlon!

CHAPTER V

For a moment Don Craig and his companion members of the Cloud Patrol could not believe their eyes. A feeling of chagrin and disappointment overwhelmed them. Lindy, their police dog, instead of catching one of the thieves who had been stealing gasoline and oil at the flying field and vandalizing some of the airplanes there, had cornered Nick Conlon the night watchman, in the factory doorway.

And Nick was furious. In a rage, and swearing lustily, he was trying to beat off the dog with a short night-stick he always carried. When the white rays of Don's pocket flashlight flooded the scene he turned on the three boys savagely.

"Call off this purp of yours—call him off, I say, or I'll brain him. He's a savage

devil and some day he'll kill somebody. I'm going to see to it that you ain't allowed to bring him on the field any more."

Don made haste to leap in and seize Lindy by the thick scruff of his neck and drag him back from the doorway.

Lindy was reluctant to go. He growled and snarled and glared savagely at the night watchman.

"He was on the trail of the gas thieves, Nick," explained Don. "They came around this way—behind the factory. Didn't you hear them? Didn't you see them?"

"Huh—gas thieves—er—yeah—sure I heard 'em," stuttered Conlon. Then he added, "I was inside the factory. Heard 'em runnin' and came out of this door here to head 'em off when this hyena pounced on me. Only for him I'd have caught 'em, I guess. Now you kids go on back to your tent and take that mutt with you. Go on, git out and leave this night-watchin' to me. I don't like you fussing around the place after dark anyhow. I'm going to see Mr.

Fullerton about it. I'm going to have him make you get rid of that dog, too. Now git home all of you. Go on."

Disappointed and somewhat crestfallen Don and his two companions left the rear of the factory building and started for their tent, Don still leading Lindy, who constantly turned and growled in the direction of Nick Conlon.

Beyond the factory building, and on their way to the tent, Don muttered in perplexed tones:

"That was sure mighty queer wasn't it? How the dickens could Lindy have turned his mind from those thieves, who were just ahead of him to attack Nick? He hates the night watchman, we all know that, although Nick has never done anything to him as far as I know except swear at him. I don't believe this pup is as good a hound as we though he was. No trained police dog would leave the trail of a bunch of thieves to attack a night watchman, do you think so, Don?"

"Doesn't seem likely. The whole thing

is rather queer. I can't make it out. I thought we would have one man to turn over to the police, and I guess if we arrested one the rest of the gang would lay mighty low for a while. As it is they might even come back again to-night and wreck a few of the machines trying to steal parts. They might even get in to the *Black Hawk.*"

"Oh, I don't know," said Babe. "I think the Fullerton plant and our hangar are mighty safe with Nick Conlon around there all the time."

"Well maybe so—yet you never can tell," said Don evidently very much worried.

Nor did that worry forsake him until next morning, when he and the boys arrived at the hangar, and had a look at the *Black Hawk.* The door of the hangar was safely locked, and the *Black Hawk* looked undisturbed. Don climbed into the cock-pit and looked at the gas and oil gauges. He had filled the tanks the evening before and he felt relieved to find the instruments still registering total capacity. Evidently no

one had tampered with their fuel and oil supply. He realized that a certain checkup could be made by climbing up on top of the wings where the fuel tanks were located and measuring their supply with a measuring stick. But that seemed useless when the gauges showed a full supply. He was prompted to do that anyway just to satisfy his mind that the tanks had not been drained, but at that moment Lieutenant Harmon came into the hangar.

"Well whatever damage those marauders did around the place last night, they haven't bothered with our machine at all, thank goodness," said Don as he climbed down to greet the aviator.

"I'm glad of that," said the test pilot. "I worried about it a little. I heard this morning that the thieves have been monkeying around some of the public hangars again and that they ripped out a lot of copper piping from the Fancher and the Baro and swiped both carburetors. Almost ruined the two planes. It's a crying shame. We'll

have to get better protection here at the field right off. I told Mr. Fullerton so this morning. He's going to see Nick Conlon and get him to rustle up a squad of special watchmen who will be here at the field from now on."

"I don't see why they haven't had more than one watchman here anyhow. If there had been a couple of men around I think we might have nabbed one of those fellows last night," said Don, and he related all that had transpired at the field the night before.

"That's strange, isn't it? Evidently that dog of yours doesn't like Nick. I'm not so fond of him myself. But I guess he's a good watchman. So far no thieves have broken into the factory, which is something to his credit. But you boys had better be careful sneaking around nights that way, at that. Conlon might think you are some of the gang and shoot you up. You'll have to be especially careful if he gets a couple more watchmen on the job."

"Well, I suppose we are taking chances," admitted Don thoughtfully.

With the *Black Hawk* to all appearances safe from the vandals who were getting bolder in their nefarious work about the flying-field, and with the day of the first of the two big races at hand, Don and his two companions forgot about the thieves in the rush and scurry of getting everything ready for the climbing contests that were scheduled to start at ten o'clock that morning.

With Lieutenant Harmon on the ground, and with Brackett and Simpson, the two mechanics, to give the engine a final tightening up and going over, Don and his two companions opened the big double doors of the hangar and wheeled the big black and silver bird out into the sunlight.

Although it lacked a half hour of being nine o'clock, already the crowds were arriving to witness the contest. Automobiles in a steady stream were coming down the hill from Ovington to the flying field, while from

the railroad station and the interurban trolley station spectators were arriving in crowds.

Already planes were in the air circling and swinging above the field, gay in their brilliant varnish and sparkling paint. The members of the Cloud Patrol, and especially Don, caught the spirit of the day quickly, and as Don realized that he was to be a part of the big spectacle, that he was to be the assistant pilot of one of the most important ships in the race, he could not help a strange nervous feeling in the pit of his stomach—a form of stage fright he was subject to.

But this passed as the *Black Hawk,* tuned up, was taxied over to the edge of the field by Lieutenant Harmon while Don got into his flying togs. They went up for a little test spin, circling the field twice before they came back to the starting line that was marked in white along the east end of the broad expanse. Other planes were coming down now and arranging themselves in a

TEN FEET BEHIND THE MACHINE HE LAY ON THE CONCRETE HANGAR FLOOR IN A HUDDLED HEAP.
The Pilot of the Cloud Patrol.

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line at the point where the officials of the race were located.

The steady stream of automobiles coming down the hill to the field grew to a double line as the hour of ten approached, and the crowd along the roped-off edge of the field more dense.

Officials and clerks of the field were moving about among the planes, checking up on them in one way and another, while the assistant pilots were tinkering with this, that or the other thing about their ships, and the pilots were gathered at the judges' stand receiving instructions.

During the brief wait Don adjusted and readjusted the controls, trying their action, and getting them ready for a perfect take-off. He looked over the instrument board, too, and spent some time trying to figure out the timing device that had been attached to the altimeter, for the purpose of the race. Each ship, he knew, would be given ten minutes in which to climb to its "ceiling," and

the ship that attained the greatest altitude in that period would, of course, be the winner, for all the aircraft were of the same class of ships and carrying the same amount of useful load.

Once he looked over the cock-pit cowling and ran his eye down the line of planes strung out across the field. Two positions away was the brilliant golden yellow Hobson, the plane that Lieutenant Graham had brought up from Philadelphia for the race. The assistant pilot, a chap he did not know, was in the cock-pit, and as Don looked at him the thought flashed through his mind that if Maul had done all that he should have done and refrained from doing a number of things he should not have done, in all probabilities Lieutenant Graham would have had him in the cock-pit as assistant pilot. Instead of that Maul was on the ground, working with the ground crew of another plane. Don had seen him once as he crossed the field, trundling out one of the planes;

the Vedor-Benz, as he remembered it. Don felt a little sorry for Maul.

It was quarter after ten when the conference of pilots and judges broke up and the aviators moved to their own machines. Lieutenant Harmon walked slowly toward the *Black Hawk,* with an enigmatic smile on his fine, strong face.

"You don't need to sit up there in that cock-pit for a while if you don't care to, Don," he said. "They are going to send the machines away one at a time instead of in groups, and we are number six to start. That means we won't get into the air, at the rate things are moving, until around lunch time. So come on down and watch the fun."

Don felt a distinct let-down. He had been all keyed up to get started quickly, and now to realize that it would be an hour or longer before they took to the air rather disappointed him. He climbed down out of the plane, however, and joined the pilot, who, with Don and Babe and the two mechanics,

who constituted their ground crew, grouped themselves in the shadow of the wings of their machine.

"The Chillingsworth is the first ship up," said Lieutenant Harmon. Then he added, "There she is—that white biplane they are getting ready to turn over down the line."

Don looked down the long line of planes to see ground men winding up the propeller of the big white biplane. Presently came a thump, then a bang, and another and another bang, until suddenly the motor began to roar smoothly. A few seconds of tuning followed, and a moment later the big white craft, looking as trim and as pretty as a monster seagull, roared across the field in a cloud of dust, leaped into the air and started skyward at a sharp angle, climbing swiftly.

Up, up, up it soared, mounting higher and ever higher. Lieutenant Harmon kept alternately watching the plane and his wrist-watch as the gull-like thing became

smaller and smaller in the cloudless sky until it was a mere speck.

"Ten minutes! I don't think that plane has a chance," snapped Don's chief as he looked up from his watch for the last time and squinted at the plane. "Ten thousand feet, I'd say. No more. The Chillingsworth never was a good climber."

The guess was very close. Eleven thousand, two hundred feet was announced for the biplane when it finally landed and its instruments were read.

The Marie-Antoinette was the next plane to take off. It was a monoplane, but a far faster climber, and her brief interval of flight took her to startling heights.

"Gee, that's a climb," exclaimed Don, as the big gray plane leveled off and started downward.

"Mighty close to a record, I'd say," said Lieutenant Harmon with a serious expression. Then he added, "That plane stands a good chance to get a place in this event."

It certainly looked so, for the official height was announced a few minutes later when the plane came down. It was seventeen thousand one hundred and fifty-two feet.

"That's a real climb," said Lieutenant Harmon. "There aren't many planes on the field that can duplicate that."

And what he said was borne out with the flight of the next three ships. The blue and gold Etoe made a good try at a higher ceiling, but her instruments read just short of seventeen thousand feet when she came down. The Pom, a brilliant orange biplane, got up to sixteen thousand eight hundred feet and equaled the Etoe's attempt, but it fell far short of the Antoinette's "high." Another white ship, the Fairchild, was the next to whirl aloft, but with five minutes still to fly she experienced engine trouble and had to come limping down, making a landing with difficulty.

"That's hard luck. An old buddy of mine, Dave Crawford, is flying the Fair-

child. He's a good man with a ship, but that engine trouble put him out of the running this morning. How about our ship? Have you checked up on oil and gas?" queried Lieutenant Harmon.

"Yes, sir," said Don; "I filled the tanks last night and checked up again this morning—that is I—the gauges read full." Don remembered suddenly that he had not measured the tanks.

"Gauges sometimes stick. It's best to check up with a measuring stick, Don. However, it's too late now. We're next. Climb in. On the propeller, Brackett. Dan you give him a hand."

He climbed into the cock-pit. Don went around to the other side of the machine and climbed up into his seat while Brackett leaped to the front of the ship and seized the propeller. All action now, Lieutenant Harmon adjusted ignition switch, choke and spark.

"Turn her over," he shouted.

A sucking, sobbing sound inside the motor

as the propeller was turned, then a sudden thump as it bounced back against the compression was followed instantly by a series of explosions as the cylinders began to fire, and a moment later the big cyclone engine was splitting the air with a deafening roar.

At the controls Lieutenant Harmon looked over the edge of the cock-pit at the starter with his checkered black-and-white flag held aloft. With a niceness resulting from long training he nursed the engine to the point where the plane seemed to tremble to be off, yet waited for the flag that would send it away. A moment's breathless pause, as the starter held the flag aloft, and in that moment Don, tensed in the cock-pit, gripping the dual control, had a feeling that he was on the threshold of adventure. He was highly elated, but with his elation, a thought pricked his conscience. If he had only climbed up on top of the plane that morning and measured the depths of fuel in the gas

tank, he could start that race with a free mind instead of a feeling of worry.

The flag descended with a swish. Instantly Lieutenant Harmon accelerated the ship. The *Black Hawk* fairly leaped across the ground, bumping and lurching over the uneven surface for a hundred feet before it darted into the air and like a bird started soaring skyward, the nose of the machine tilted upward at a sharp angle. They were off in the great race to reach a higher ceiling than any of the planes on the big field would attain that day.

Don looked over the edge of the cock-pit. The ground fell away below them with startling, almost sickening swiftness. He found himself gazing downward into a sea of upturned faces that looked for all the world like a sprinkle of salt across the earth. Behind the mass of spectators was the great area of parked automobiles, their varnished tops and metal work gleaming in the sunlight. To the left and right were the flat

roofs of the hangars with their circular target markings, and beyond and behind them was the big Fullerton factory, with the name painted across the roof.

But everything was fast dwarfing below them as they soared upward. They were leaving the field behind too for Lieutenant Harmon with his expert knowledge of aerial navigation was taking advantage of the changing upper air currents. The nose of the ship was tilted upward at such a tremendous angle that Don found himself tilting his body forward in an instinctive effort to balance the machine. But when he realized what he was doing he relaxed in his seat.

Up they climbed. Don glanced at his wrist-watch, then at the altimeter. In three minutes they had climbed more than five thousand feet. He made a quick mental computation. If they continued to climb as fast as they were at present they would top the Marie-Antoinette's figures by almost a thousand feet. They would reach a ceiling

of more than eighteen thousand feet. That would come very close to being a real record. Don was elated. He watched the dials carefully. He glanced at the gas and oil dials, and as he did so, a feeling of apprehension; a suspicion that something was wrong began to develop within him. Those gauges both indicated that the tanks were still full—full to the top. This could not be. With four or five minutes of steady climbing this way; with the engine sucking up and using all the gas it could consume, that fuel gauge should have dropped a little. Was it stuck? And if it was stuck, had the tanks been full as he supposed?

A great fear clutched his heart. He shot a glance at the pilot who was peering steadily ahead watching the upper air with his begoggled eyes as he shot the rocket-like machine higher and still higher, climbing constantly.

Don glanced again at the fuel gauge, then at his watch and the altimeter. The flight was more than half over. They were at the

ten-thousand-foot level. He began to feel the pressure in his ears. Breathing was harder. He had a little sense of headiness, dizziness that resulted from the fast-changing air-pressure. Still they climbed, twelve thousand, thirteen, fourteen thousand, then fifteen. The steadily advancing indicator of the altimeter moved slowly up to sixteen thousand, sixteen thousand five hundred, seven hundred, eight hundred, seventeen thousand. They had surpassed the ceiling of all the machines so far save that of the *Marie-Antoinette,* and they still had better than a minute to go. They would beat the *Antoinette.* They would top eighteen thousand. They might make nineteen thousand. Even twenty thousand and make a new record for machines in their class. They might—

Don suddenly stopped speculating on their performance, and a sickening feeling gripped him in the pit of the stomach. Came the unpleasant sound of a cylinder missing, then another and another and still

another in quick succession. They were out of gas. Fuelless, and in a moment they would be without power. The thought scarcely flashed to his mind when suddenly the motor stalled, and the next instant the ship fell away into a sickening tail-spin to begin dropping like a plummet out of the sky above.

Swiftly Lieutenant Harmon, his lips compressed and his face grim, began to operate the controls to bring the ship out of its perilous drop. Don, holding his breath watched him manipulate the wheel and rudder yoke in a quick and desperate effort to level off. They came down a thousand feet, fifteen hundred, two thousand feet, dropping far faster than they had climbed. Don could hear the air shrieking past them. He could feel the terrific strain on the trembling ship, and he wondered vaguely whether someone of the braces or struts might not collapse and send them crashing downward to their doom. They had no parachutes, for they did not want to carry that

much extra weight over their usual load, so they could not quit the craft if it came to an emergency.

But Don for a moment was so sick at heart and disappointed that he almost wished the ship would crash, with him in it, for he realized all too well that the fix they found themselves in was due entirely to his carelessness. He had not sounded the depth of the gas tank and made certain that their fuel supply was ample. He had depended upon the gasoline gauge, and it had stuck. Someone had all but drained the tank of the fuel supply during the night, and as a result they had lost an opportunity to break an altitude record, and probably lost the contest. And worse than that they were now thousands of feet above the earth with a stalled motor and no power to pull them out of the terrible tail-spin they had suddenly slipped into.

The plane wabbled and swayed and twisted and turned dizzily as it slid downward with sickening speed. Seconds seemed

like ages yet were all too terribly brief when Don realized how soon they would crash if they continued downward. They dropped another thousand and still another thousand. He was thankful that they had attained the height they had. It gave Lieutenant Harmon a little longer to right the ship and bring it out on even keel.

How swiftly and carefully the expert pilot worked. There was no fear in his face; only a grim tenseness about his firm square jaw.

Once it seemed as if he had succeeded in getting the ship on even keel again, but before Don could breath a sigh of relief it spun and dropped into another tail-spin. A second time he leveled it off. And this time it stayed on even keel and began to volplane. Lieutenant Harmon's square jaw relaxed a little then and Don knew that the peril, for the moment was over.

But they would have to make a landing without power and without being able to choose their landing space. They were five

thousand feet up. Don looked over the cockpit cowling. The earth seemed to be rushing up toward them at a terrific speed. In a matter of seconds—a minute at the most and they would hit the earth. But where? And how?

They had left Ovington Field far behind. Don could not see it in the distance. There was a lot of woods below them. But ahead, in the direction they were gliding was a big fenced-in field with a farmyard beyond. The field was cultivated. It looked as if it contained potatoes, or young corn. It was mighty uneven, but the best place that presented itself for a landing. Lieutenant Harmon was guiding the *Black Hawk* toward it. Would they make it? They were coming down at terrific speed. If they could not reach the field before they came to earth they would crash in the woods and the *Black Hawk* would be smashed to a thousand pieces.

They were three thousand feet up. Then in a breathless instant they had dropped to

two thousand feet. And a moment later less than a thousand. They crossed the fence at the lower end of the field scarcely five hundred feet high, and a few seconds later Don felt a jarring bump as their wheel struck the soft earth of the potato patch and caused the machine to bounce violently in the air, only to come down again heavily, bounce along for a hundred feet, then suddenly come to an abrupt stop with a crash and the rending of wood beneath them. But fortunately they stopped right side up without a nose over.

Lieutenant Harmon sat back in his seat and breathed a sigh of relief. Then he took off his goggles and headgear and wiped his perspiring forehead.

"Smashed our landing gear, I guess. It sounded so," he said. Then added, "That means we are stuck here until we can get a team or a truck to pull us out onto hard ground where we'll have to wait until we get a new landing gear from the factory. But we are lucky we didn't land in the woods

yonder. It would have been the end for both of us. Here comes the farmer and his family now, probably ready to give us the dickens for coming down into his potato field."

Then turning his blue-gray eyes full on Don he seemed to look deep into Don's conscience-stricken soul.

"Don," he said simply, but in a voice that registered his disappointment, "the blame for this is on your shoulders. I'm surprised and disappointed. If you had measured our gas with a stick, or even looked into the tank this morning instead of depending implicitly on the dials, this couldn't have happened. As it is we've lost the race and cracked up the ship, and we had a good chance to win the climb. Let it be a big lesson to you, my boy. Always check up on everything about a plane very carefully before you take it into the air. Safe flying depends first on the amount of thoughtful care the aviator devotes to his machine.

Only good luck saved our lives this time."

And Don, with a lump in his throat that felt as big as an apple, and a very heavy heart could scarcely gulp back the tears as he answered:

"I—I—I'm sorry, sir. It was very careless of me—terribly careless, and—and—I have let you down rather shamefully after —the—confidence—you—put—in me."

Despite his struggles to keep it back a big sob escaped him, and utterly miserable and unhappy he flung his arm against the edge of the cock-pit and buried his face in the folds of his leather coat while big tears of disappointment and unhappiness coursed down his cheeks.

Lieutenant Harmon stood beside him in silence for a moment. Then in fatherly fashion he put his hand on Don's leather-clad shoulder.

"There, there, Don," he said, "buck up. Let it be a lesson to you, but don't let it take the starch out of you. There is another race

to fly on Saturday. Let's decide to do our best to win that one. Come on now, climb down. Here comes the farmer. We'll begin negotiations for a lift out of this place. Perhaps we can get back to the field before the contest is over."

CHAPTER VI

The farmer, in whose potato field the *Black Hawk* had descended, to smash up her landing gear, was all worked up to give Mr. Harmon and Don a thorough scolding for coming down on his property and spoiling a few dozen thriving potato plants.

"Consarn you flyin' folks," he stormed, after he saw that neither Don nor Mr. Harmon were injured, "You're th' third machine that has come down on my farm this summer, an' everyone o' yuh has ruined a coupla bushels of pertaters. If—if—"

Mr. Harmon interrupted his tirade with a warm smile, that melted his anger, and offered him a good price to hitch up his horses and pull the ship out of the potato patch onto firm ground. Indeed, the farmer saw quickly that the amount of money he

could earn by doing that sort of a good turn would compensate him for the few possible bushels of potatoes that had been ruined and he became very friendly.

"Don't own no horses. But I got a tractor what u'll yank yew outa there quicker 'en scat," he assured the pilot. Then he added, "An' my son u'll drive you folks over to th' flyin' field too, after the job is done."

"Good enough. Let's get started. I want to see the ship on firm ground where we can leave her until we can bring a new landing gear down from the factory and put it on," said Mr. Harmon.

So the farmer whose name was Hewlett, and a husky son, named Jack, brought out the tractor, hitched block and tackle to the airplane, and the helpless *Black Hawk,* after much careful effort was finally hauled out of the potato patch and up into the farmer's dooryard, where Mr. Harmon carefully covered the engine with a tarp hay cover the farmer loaned them, and

otherwise protected the plane against the weather.

It took a great deal longer than any of them had expected, and the hands of Don's watch read after six o'clock by the time they had taken off their muddy flying togs, and washed up.

"Yew folks better stay to dinner. Maw's cooked up enough for us all. Then Jack can ride you back in th' flivver and land you home a little after dark," said the farmer, waxing more and more genial with the work done and a few crisp bills in payment in his pocket.

"We'll go you," said Mr. Harmon heartily, for aside from a hot dog and roll snatched by both of them from one of the concession booths at the field just before they started they had neither of them eaten since breakfast.

And what a dinner "Maw" Hewlett cooked. There was luscious lamb stew with plenty of new vegetables. Milk that frothed in the glass with the rich cream it carried,

home-made bread, home-made sweet butter, home-made pickles, and jam, and best of all a tremendous home-made cherry pie, to be topped off with huge crisp cookies.

Don's spirits began to climb out of the hole into which they had slumped, and by the time the meal was over he was feeling almost cheerful again, though he did not cease to be conscience stricken at having lost the race, and been responsible, through his carelessness, for the crack-up of the Fullerton racing ship. Indeed, he felt very unhappy about the whole thing all afternoon, and the drive back to the flying field in the evening, although Mr. Harmon never once spoke of the crash and his disappointment in not winning the climb.

Early in the afternoon Mr. Harmon had used the farmer's telephone to learn from the Fullerton factory that their rival Graham, in his Hobson Golden Eagle had won the speed climb with a height of eighteen thousand three hundred. The little Spad second and the Marie Antoinette third. He

had also told the factory what had happened to them and where they had landed, so that the people at the field were not particularly worried about them. In fact when they arrived at the factory there was no one there to greet them except Nick Conlon, and one of the new watchmen. They were both waiting at Mr. Harmon's car, when the Hewlett Ford pulled up and let the pilot and Don out.

"Thought you was never comin' back to claim yuhr car, Leftenant. Me 'en Bill here kinda thought we was gonna own a snappy roadster," said Nick Conlon to Mr. Harmon with a mirthless laugh as with his strange, unpleasant eyes he watched the pilot and Don climb out of the flivver.

"I need that bus to get back home with," said Mr. Harmon as he opened the door of his car and got in. Then turning to Don, he said, "Good-night, Don. Go to camp and get a good night's sleep. Don't fret about to-day. Just remember what I told you. I'll see you early in the morning. We'll have

to go out to Hewletts with a truck and that new landing gear and see it put on properly so that we can fly the *Black Hawk* back."

Don said good-night and watched the roadster disappear in the darkness.

"Gee, he's being pretty decent to me, after the way I let him down," muttered Don to no one in particular, as he turned toward the path that led around the side of the factory to the field and the camp beyond. But as he turned he became conscious of the fishy stare of Nick Conlon, and the rather unpleasant gaze of the second night watchman, Bill, fastened on him.

"What happened to yez, kid?" queried Nick.

"What happened?" demanded Don, "Why some of those dirty crooks who are prowling around this place at night stole our gasoline and oil—almost drained it all, and I, like a darned fool didn't check up on the tanks close enough this morning. We ran out of fuel just when we could have won the race and—and crashed."

Conlon and Bill looked at him with mean smiles on their hard faces.

"Huh. Didn't check up eh? Maybe you forgot to fill them tanks in the first place. Or maybe you just put in about five gallons and swiped the other five er ten gallons for yourself, eh kid?"

"What? Why what do you mean," demanded Don scarcely able to credit his ears.

"I mean just what I said, Bo," growled Nick. "There's been too much talk about stealin' an' thievin' an' like of that around here, an' all of us lookin' for th' thieves an' not gettin' nowheres. An' why? Because I'm thinkin' that thievin' is bein' done right inside th' works. There's too many kids hangin' 'round th' place, needin' pocket money, see? An' stealin' gas an' oil an' sellin' it again is easy meat. Believe me I'm gonna tell ol' Fullerton just how I think, an' have him clear out a few dozen of you fellers. Then I bet th' stealin' u'll stop."

"Why you crooked-brained old lump of

mud, do you mean to accuse me or my friends of stealing gas and oil, and parts of machines? For two pins I'd—I'd—"

Don stammered in impotent anger as his fists instinctively clenched and his jaw squared.

Nick Conlon saw how he bristled, and gripping his night stick tighter stepped aggressively toward Don, with Bill just behind him. Both their unpleasant faces looked positively ugly, and Don realized that they were a mean pair and that they had both might and their authority as night watchmen to back them up. They could pommel him to a jelly if they wanted to, and then bring charges against him of attacking them. It would never do for him to buckle into them. He'd be bound to get the worst of it in the end.

"Don't get lippy, or mussy either, kid, or we'll show you where you get off, see?" grated Conlon. Then he added, "There's a pack of you fresh youngsters hangin' around this place an' you are one of 'em.

That young buck, Maul who usta work for Graham is another. But before I get through with you both an' a coupla others of yuh you're gonna be dressed down considerable. Now you just git home to your pup tent an' doncha lemme see yuh prowlin' 'round here in the dark at night again—never. Git."

And Don, in a rage, but utterly helpless to do anything, turned on his heel and started for camp where Babe and Dan were waiting for him.

They greeted him with enthusiasm until they got a good look at his face in the wan light of the camp lantern they had hanging from the tent pole. Then Dan demanded an explanation.

And in a burst of unhappiness Don told them, beginning with the story of his own carelessness in not checking up the fuel tanks and ending with Nick Conlon's accusation that he might have dealt in short measures and stolen some of the gas and oil to be sold for pocket money.

"Well I'll be hanged! The dirty old moss-back! Thinks we are stealing does he? Why for a nickel I'd—"

"You'd what—now just what would you do?" queried Don.

"Gosh, I don't know. He's got the best of us. He's a man and he's night watchman. If he goes and complains about us to Mr. Fullerton and suggests we might be doing the stealing there is only one thing that will happen. We'll be fired. But why pick on us? Why doesn't he light on Maul and Tinker and those fellows who are always hanging around the field. There's a bunch of 'em. To my mind that's where the trouble is too."

"Don't worry, he suspects Maul. He said so. That's the dickens of it. Maul and his gang might be doing it—I almost believe they are. But when they get to firing the boys around the plant, we'll all go—we'll all be blamed for what Maul and those other kids are doing. What's the answer, you fellows?"

"The answer is we'll have to find some way of keeping Maul and those boys off the field. But how is quite another question," said Babe Crawford.

"You're right it's another question and one we'll have to do a lot of thinking about, let me tell you. Come on, let's turn in. I think we're going to have a hard day tomorrow," concluded Don as he began to unlace his shoes.

But despite the fact that Don realized he would have a lot to do next morning, and would have to drag himself out of bed rather early, he did not go to sleep very quickly. He had too much on his mind. For an hour or longer he laid in his cot staring up at the cone-shaped peak of the tent thinking. Now and then Babe or Dan stirred in their sleep, or grunted some incoherent sentence, and occasionally Lindy, the police dog who slept under his bed moved restlessly. Once the dog whined, and a few moments later he crawled out from under Don's cot and stood beside him look-

ing at him. Then he went out of the tent, where Don could hear him growling softly.

Presently he came into the tent again and straight to Don's cot, where he stood looking at the boy a moment before he placed one big forefoot on Don's chest and began to paw him gently, at the same time whining softly.

"What's the matter, Lindy?" whispered Don sitting up.

Lindy whined louder and began to pace back and forth across the tent nervously moving toward the door and back to Don's cot again. He was telling Don as plainly as he knew how that he wanted him to go to the entrance of the tent;—to step outside perhaps, where he would find something that would interest him.

It was not difficult for Don to interpret Lindy's actions, but he could not understand why the dog should want him to go outside. Was someone prowling about the camp? That was not likely, for Lindy would not have acted the way he did. He

would have stormed out of the tent with a lot of barking and put the night visitor to flight in a hurry. No, something else was troubling the dog,—working him up to a point of nervous excitement for Lindy was whining incessantly now and trotting back and forth to the door of the tent, and now and then stopping to paw at Don or take the blankets in his teeth and drag at them as if he hoped to get him out of the bed that way.

"What for gracious sakes ails you anyhow, Lindy," grumbled Don finally when he saw the dog would not be denied his attention.

Swinging up to the edge of his cot he groped in the darkness for his breeches and shoes. Dragging them on, he threw his flannel shirt across his shoulder for the night was chilly, and followed the highly excited Lindy beyond the tent flap, wondering, the while, why the dog was so anxious to get him outside.

But he had scarcely stepped through the

tent doorway when he realized the cause of the dog's excitement. To the north, across the landing field in the direction of the Fullerton factory and the public hangars beyond he beheld with surprise and horror shooting gleams of sinister red in the darkness, while against the star bepowdered night skyballooning upward, was a heavy bank of smoke that grew larger as he looked at it.

"Fire!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "Up at the plant! By jingoes it looks like the Fullerton factory!"

Lindy, barking now that he saw Don understood, started to race off through the darkness in the direction of the sinister flames that were splitting the smoke bank and casting a weird light across the field.

Don was impelled to follow. Indeed, he broke into a headlong run after Lindy before he thought of his companions. Turning he dashed back to the tent to arouse them.

"Dan! Babe! Tumble out! In a hurry! There's a fire up at the flying field, and I believe it's the Fullerton factory," he yelled through the tent doorway bringing both boys out of the cots in a hurry.

CHAPTER VII

But it was not the Fullerton factory. All three boys realized that as they ran as fast as they could across the landing field in the direction of the blaze. The flames were shooting from a building to the right and beyond the factory, and in a few moments Don identified the threatened structure as one of the public hangars.

"It's No. 2," he shouted excitedly. Then added, "Doggone the building looks as if it was doomed. And there are a bunch of racing planes in there. Thunder, what a situation. How did it happen, do you suppose? Could it be—s-a-a-ay that's where Maul and his crowd hangs out—behind hangar No. 2. Do you think they could have a hand in this trouble?"

"I'll bet a cookie they did. Probably

broke in there to steal gas or oil or something. There are some cigarette smokers in that crowd. They might have left a lighted butt around or something," cried Dan breathlessly.

"What a dickens of a thing to have happen, and right on the eve of the big Reliability Race. Wow, won't there be a great how-de-do about this!" exclaimed Babe.

"That's some fire," shouted Don, watching the flames as they approached the building. Then he added, "But they are all in one corner of the building. We might be able to throw open the doors of the hangar and wheel some of those planes out into the open. Come on fellows,—full speed ahead. Let's see what rescue work we can do."

"Right-o. But we'd better be careful. There are drums of gasoline in there too and barrels of oil. That whole building is likely to go up with a bang most any moment," warned Dan.

On they ran toward the fire-swept building, flames from which were leaping from

the side and rear windows and curling up over the roof in a sinister way, while great rolling clouds of black smoke ballooned upward and a rumbling roar vibrated through the night. It was a wicked sight, and Don knew that they were risking their lives to contemplate entering the structure to push out the threatened planes. But the danger was of secondary consideration to him and his companions at the moment for their one thought was to save the air craft, some of which were valued at more than twenty-five thousand dollars.

As they drew nearer the fire-swept building, and emerged from the darkness into the ring of light cast by the flames, Don saw other figures come running up from the direction of town. And the first of them he identified was Maul.

This rather surprised Don, and in a measure banished the suspicions Don had been entertaining concerning Maul and the origin of the blaze. Certainly if Maul had been responsible for the fire or had any knowl-

edge of how it happened he would not come running to the blaze. In all probabilities he would be running away from it,—unless of course he had more nerve and more ingenuity than Don gave him credit for, in which case he might be able to stifle his fears and return to the burning building to allay suspicion. Clever criminals did such things,—returned to the scene of their crime to throw off suspicion but Don doubted whether Maul would have nerve enough to come back to the building if he had set it on fire. And these doubts grew as, Maul with Tinker Muir and several other boys of the gang from Ovington drew into the firelight, and discovered Don. There was none of the old animosity in the way Maul greeted him,—just wide-eyed excitement and concern written on his features as he shouted loudly to Don:—

"Jiminy crickets, what a fire. How did it start, Craig? Has anyone turned in an alarm?"

"Search me. I don't know. Just saw the

blaze and came running," replied Don.

"We saw it from Tinker's house. He lives right up on the hill there. The four of us were building a model and staying up rather late when I just happened to look out of the window."

"Maybe Nick Conlon has gone to turn in the alarm. I don't see him around. But meanwhile there are a lot of planes in there that will go up in smoke before the firemen come. I think we could save some of them if we could get the double doors open."

"I can open 'em. They're a cinch," yelled Maul. Then he added, "Come on all you fellows, we're going to shove some of those planes out of the building."

Maul made a dash through the smoke toward the front door of the hangar and began working the lock.

But it did not prove to be as easy as he had thought. He was fumbling with the big latch when Don came up.

"I—huh—thought it would—huh—be

easy, but—huh—darn that smoke—it ain't," panted Maul struggling with the lock.

It was a big brass padlock. Don saw the difficulty, and a moment later he saw the remedy. A wooden chock with an iron handle lay in the runway of the hangar. It made a capital mallet. Don seized it in both hands and shoving Maul aside aimed a terrific blow at the lock. The chock struck it at exactly the right angle and the lock snapped open with a loud click.

Yelling triumphantly Maul seized it, yanked it out of the staple and grabbing the big iron handle on the door began to haul it open, while Don unfastened the floor bolts of the other door and swung that one outward also.

With those doors swinging wide a new draft was created for the fire and instantly the roar of the blaze redoubled in fierceness. And added to it was the crackle and snap of the flames as they reached out in new directions to devour more of the structure and

its valuable contents. A terrific volume of yellowish black smoke rolled through the doorway accompanied by a scorching hot draft that all but drove Don and Maul and their companions back. But this smoke thinned out presently and the boys with their arms upflung across their faces to protect their eyes and noses against the rolling gases plunged into the hangar, Don first, with Maul close behind him and the rest of them strung out in a line.

The building was crowded with racing planes. They had been sandwiched in every possible way and crowded right up to the door. The boys did not have to take three steps before they were confronted by the big wing spread of the gray and green Marie-Antoinette, the machine that had taken third place in the speed climb that afternoon.

Eagerly all the boys laid hold of the plane and began to yank and shove it toward the door. It moved easily and in less than a

dozen seconds they had hauled it onto the runway and were shoving it out on the field.

"That's one saved," shouted Don as they trundled the machine well out of reach of the fire. Then he added, taking command of the situation, "Come on! Back again! Let's get a couple out this time. We only need two men to a machine. They roll easily. You three fellows take the first machine, and you two the second. Dan, you and Babe take the third, and Maul and I will go further into the building and take another. In that way we can have four moving at once, savvy?"

"Right-o! Good idea!" exclaimed Maul and several others and they started on a run back for the burning hangar. In they plunged again. The little Spad was nearest the door and behind it and to the right was the disabled Fancher. Tinker Muir and two other Ovington boys seized the Spad while two more boys scurried behind it and laid hold of the Fancher. But by the

time they had reached their machine the Spad, a light affair, was moving toward the door.

"That's the ticket, fellows. Get 'em all moving. We'll get everyone of these planes out before we finish. Tie your handkerchief around your face if the smoke bothers you," yelled Don coughing and gasping as he fought his way through the heavy boil of smoke rolling through the building.

The Spad was being trundled toward the door, and two boys were starting the Fancher, as Don and Paul Maul made their way past the second machine, with Dan and Babe beside them. The Chillingsworth was the next plane behind the Fancher, and a little to its right. It was jammed in sideways and Dan and Babe had to turn the thing around before they could get it started toward the door. Don and Maul put their arms to the wing braces and helped them get the ship started forward. Then with warning shouts for them to hustle they brushed past the Chillingsworth and together waded

through the smoke toward the rear of the building where they felt certain there would be still more machines.

There were two others in the building. One was the Bristol and the other, to Don's amazement, they discovered to be the Hobson Golden Eagle, Lieutenant Graham's plane in which he had won the speed climb. For a moment Don could not comprehend this. He thought that the Hobson would be housed in Graham's own hangar, down at the flying school.

"Why it's the Golden Eagle, Graham's machine," he exclaimed as he peered through the smoke at the big plane in front of him. The weird light from the tongues of flames that split the smoke bank from the rear of the hangar lit up the golden yellow ship and made its identity unmistakable.

"That's it. It's Graham's plane alright," cried Maul. "He didn't have room for it down at the flying school, so he stored it here. Tinker told me. But sa-a-a-y, look! By jingoes the thieves were working

on it when the fire started, I'll bet a nickel. See where they were trying to get the carburetors off? They were trying to steal them. Look at all that copper pipe that has been ripped out. There are some tools too, —and look, there's some guy's coat. And there—"

"—a night stick. Nick Conlon's. That's his coat too. I recognize it," exclaimed Don taking a quick step forward and picking a short police club up from the floor.

"Well, I'll be doggoned. What does that mean?" exclaimed Maul.

"What does it mean? Why it looks to me as if Conlon was the man who had been working on the Hobson—"

"Jingoes. Trying to steal the carburetors?" cried Maul.

"Either that or—"

"What?"

"Why maybe he came in here to catch the thieves and got into trouble," exclaimed Don a sudden thought striking him. "Maybe the thieves knocked him out and left him

here, then set fire to the building to cover up their crime. Maybe he's in here now, hurt —unconscious! He'll be burned alive if he is unless we can get him out! Come on, Maul, let's—"

"Wushung-g-g-g-g!"

Whatever Don intended to add to what he had already said was interrupted by a dull, muffled explosion in the rear of the hangar and at the same time a sudden flood of flames illuminated the place in an almost blinding glare. Both boys staggered back involuntarily and instinctively flung their arms across their faces to protect their eyes from the burst of flames that leaped toward them from the rear of the structure.

"Gasoline drum! Exploded! Come on! Let's get out!" cried Maul.

"But Conlon! If he's in here, we've got to get him out! OH, NICK—NICK CONLON!" shouted Don.

But only the steadily increasing roar of the flames from the rear of the hangar answered his shouts.

"If he's in here he's gone—burned to death! Look! That gasoline has flooded the whole back of the hangar. He couldn't live a minute if he was in there, and we sure can't wade through that fire to find out. Come on! Let's dig out!" cried Maul, his voice registering excitement that was very close kin to panic.

Don realized that Maul was right. If Conlon was in the rear of the building he was beyond help. The place was a seething furnace back there. Moreover the flames were surging toward them in terrible fiery waves that threatened to drag them down and envelop them. They must beat a retreat,—either that or take the chances of being burned alive. Maul was turning to flee. Don was on the point of following him, when a sudden thought struck him.

They might save one of the two remaining planes in the hangar if they hurried. They might trundle one of the ships out ahead of them. He glanced first at the Bristol. But he realized instantly that it was

"DON'T MAKE NO QUICK PASSES, KID, OR I'LL CRACK YUH," HE SNARLED,

The Pilot of the Cloud Patrol.

beyond saving. It was turned sideways in the hangar and already the fire had reached its right wing and was consuming it with a jubilant crackling sound.

But the Hobson was facing the hangar door. Apparently they needed only to shove it ahead of them out onto the field. As yet it was untouched by the blaze, but in another dozen seconds it would be a mass of flames.

"Wait, Maul, let's save Graham's ship! We can shove it out ahead of us!" he shouted to his companion.

Maul stopped and stared at him through the smoke.

"Do you think we can? I'd like to. I think a lot of Graham even if he did fire me and I'd like to see him fly the Hobson in the Reliability Race. Believe me if we save the Eagle that will settle the Black Hawk's chances. Graham won the speed climb and he'll win the Reliability too," cried Maul.

An ignoble thought crossed Don Craig's mind as Maul said this. The Hobson was the Black Hawk's most formidable rival in

the Reliability contest. If they left it there to burn up in the hangar he and Lieutenant Harmon need have no further fear of being beaten by it. But he realized instantly that such thoughts were unworthy of him and he wiped them from his mind.

He would save the Hobson just to see if saving it did settle Black Hawk's chances in the Reliability. Where had he heard Maul say those same words before? Wasn't that what he had said to Tinker Muir that day as he surprised the pair of them in surreptitious conversation behind this very hangar? Could they have been talking about the Golden Eagle then as Maul was now? Those were the swift thoughts that leaped through Don Craig's mind as he turned to view the situation of the Hobson.

The golden ship rested with its tail toward the fire and its nose toward the wide double doors leading to the landing field. But the flames from the rear of the building were leaping at it like a pack of snarling wolves threatening momentarily to ignite its thin

fabric body and consume it utterly. Indeed, one of the tail fins had already caught and a tiny finger of flames curled upward as the fire started to eat a hole through the surface.

With a cry Don seized the coat that lay across the fuselage and rushing toward the tail of the plane beat out the fire that was starting there. Then ducking under the body he tossed the coat into the Hobson's cock-pit and seized hold of the struts.

"Grab hold, Maul, and start her forward! Shove with all your might! We've got to get her out of here! Hurry!" he shouted to Maul who had already grasped the struts on the opposite side.

Together they braced their legs and pushed, and a moment later the heavy plane was moving slowly but surely forward through the rolling smoke bank toward the doors of the hangar.

But it was not as easy as Don had anticipated it would be. The Hobson was heavy and he, for some strange reason felt weak.

Were the smoke and gases inside the burning building getting to him, making him dizzy; sapping his strength? He had a strange feeling of headiness, and the odor of burning oil and gasoline was nauseating. His eyes smarted and his throat and nose burned, and the exertion of pushing the Hobson forward made the blood pound in his neck and temples. He was feeling the need for several good breaths of pure air too. He had swallowed so much smoke that his lungs ached. He wondered if Maul felt as badly as he did.

Doggedly he stuck to the task of shoving the heavy Hobson forward. He leaned all his weight against it and pushed mightily. But the machine seemed to grow heavier suddenly. Then it began to slew around in Maul's direction. Maul wasn't shoving his hardest. He wasn't shoving at all. Don stopped and stooping peered under the fuselage. Through the smoke he expected to see Maul pushing against the opposite wing. But Maul was not there. Where was

he? Had he deserted the ship and rushed out of the hangar into the fresh air as Don longed to do?

Hastily Don ducked under the fuselage and looked for Maul through the smoke. He saw him. Ten feet behind the machine he lay on the concrete hangar floor in a huddled heap. He was unconscious.

Don rushed back toward him and turned him over. Maul's face was ghastly in the weird light of the fire. His lips were blue. Instantly Don realized that there was an excess of monoxide gas in the hangar from the burning gasoline and oil and that Maul had been overcome by it. That was just the way it affected some people. Knocked them out suddenly before they could realize they were being asphyxiated. Maybe that was what was making him feel so weak too. His legs were wobbling. He needed fresh air. Oh, for a breath of it!

But he could not go and leave Maul there. He bent over and tried to lift the limp form of Graham's former grease monkey. As he

did so he realized how very weak he was. Raising Maul required all the strength he could muster. But somehow he managed it and with him in his arms made his staggering way as far as the wings of the Hobson. Here again the strange headiness he had experienced a few moments before came over him, and with it a great fear that he too was going to sink down unconscious, to lie as Maul had done, helpless on the floor of the fire-swept building.

Desperately he fought against the weakness that overwhelmed him, gritting his teeth and forcing himself to take one slow step after another in the direction of the double doors of the hangar. His knees trembled. His feet seemed weighted with tons of lead. Twice he stumbled and all but went down, but each time he found the strength to steady himself and push onward. He must go on. He must reach the door! He began to count his slow steps forward. One, two, three, four—

He could go no further. Despite the utmost willpower and strength he could summon his knees buckled beneath him and he fell heavily with Maul under him. A moment he struggled weakly on the floor. He even got to his knees. He tried to stand again meanwhile calling in a husky voice for assistance. If only Dan or Babe or some of the boys outside would venture into the garage once more they might save them both —save them and the Hobson. He called again and again huskily as he tried to stand upright, but his voice seemed to be drowned in the roar of the flames advancing behind him. His situation seemed hopeless. He was utterly powerless to do anything. Something had sapped all the strength from him. The world was spinning. He seemed to be on a vast merry-go-round whirling wildly. Grotesque shapes leaped before his strangely distorted vision. He saw elephants, giants, and the wildest sort of hobgoblins floating through the smoke toward

him. They danced about him, shouted to him, then seized him in their hands and, carrying him, floated off with him through space into the land of complete oblivion trundling the Golden Eagle with them in a weird procession.

CHAPTER VIII

Don's next conscious realization was that he was counting the flowers in the paper that covered the walls of the room in which he was lying. It was a strange room. He had never been in it before. But it wasn't a hospital. Raising his head he looked about curiously. There was another bed in the room, a twin to the one he was lying on, and in it, his eyes closed, lay Paul Maul. At the foot of the second bed stood little Tinker Muir grinning at him and holding his fingers to his lips for silence.

"Shus-s-s. Don't wake Maul. The doctor says you should both sleep as long as you can and that you'll be all right when you wake up. How do you feel?" whispered Tinker coming to Don's bedside.

"Fine. But how did I get here? What

happened and—oh yes, I remember. The fire. I tried to get Maul out and—"

"Yes. And you went under doing it. Monoxide gas got both of you. We fellows came in and yanked you out just in time. You were still trying to save Maul when we reached you, and you were talking like an idiot. But we—"

"Huh, who was trying to save me?" queried a husky voice from the other bed.

Don and Tinker turned to see Maul awake, getting up on his elbow.

"Why Don was. We found him trying to drag you out. But he didn't have strength enough left to crawl himself. You should be darned grateful, Paul."

"Grateful? I am. I don't remember much. I was trying to shove the Eagle out when, bingo, something knocked me for a loop."

"It was monoxide gas. It got me too," said Don. Then he queried of Tinker, "Did you fellows save the Hobson?"

"Yep, we got it out. The Bristol was the only plane lost in the fire."

"Good work. Guess I'd better be turning out. What time is it, Tinker, and is this to-day or to-morrow? How long have I been here and where am I anyhow?" asked Don his old spirit coming back to him fast.

Tinker grinned. "This is to-morrow afternoon," he said. "The fire was last night, and you are in my house; my room in fact. We brought you up here after the fire. And you don't need to be in a hurry to turn out because, like the man in jail, you ain't goin' nowhere in particular."

"Huh? Who says so? I'm supposed to be over at Hewlett's farm helping Mr. Harmon get a new landing gear under the Black Hawk," said Don.

A strange expression passed over Tinker's face as Don said this, which the leader of the Cloud Patrol could not help noticing.

"Sa-a-ay Tinker, why do you look that way? You know something. What is it?

Give me the bad news," he demanded.

"It's just that you don't need to worry about the Black Hawk or anything else down at the field. You are fired from the Fullerton factory, Don, so is Dan and Babe. And I got the G.O.B. from the flying school. Orders have been issued that no more boys are allowed on the field hereafter."

"Wha-a-at! How come!" demanded Don, sitting up in bed suddenly.

"It's Conlon. He's responsible," said Tinker.

"Conlon? What do you mean?"

"Why they had him on the carpet at the Fullerton factory this morning, early, after the firemen put out the blaze. Mr. Fullerton and Mr. Sheldon were there. They wanted to know how a fire like that could start while he was on the job. And Conlon blamed it all on us boys. He said he caught you and Dan and Babe trying to break into that hangar last night and that he chased you. He intimated that the hangar caught fire from some of the matches you used while

you were trying to pick the lock of the back door. He said there were too many kids hanging around the field night and day anyway and that we were all stealing gas and oil and tools and selling them, so Mr. Fullerton and Mr. Sheldon issued orders that there were to be no more boys allowed on the field. We were all fired and warned to clear out," concluded Tinker hopelessly.

For a moment Don stared at Tinker scarcely able to credit his senses. Fired! All of them! Then that meant he couldn't fly with Mr. Harmon in the Reliability Race on Saturday! When the full significance of the boy's statement dawned on him and he realized the injustice of Conlon's accusation his eyes flashed with righteous anger.

"Why the dirty hound," he exclaimed. "Of all the low-down things to accuse a fellow of and—"

"Sa-a-ay," exploded Maul, sitting up in his bed, "that dirty crook is blaming us fellows to cover up his own crookedness. He knows more about the stealing that has been

going on at the field than anyone else. He—he—why Don, didn't we find his coat and night stick in the hangar? Remember?"

"Right. They were just where someone had been tampering with the Hobson. He left them there I'll bet a doughnut. And I thought maybe he had been caught in the building—I wanted to try to find him—rescue him, the dirty pup. If anyone should be fired, he's the baby."

"Don't worry. He has been. They tied a can to him and his whole police force. Mr. Fullerton said he didn't want watchmen around the plant who couldn't keep kids from stealing stuff right under their noses so he discharged him. They have a half dozen retired policemen from New York on the job, this morning. They are all over the place and they won't let a boy anywhere near the field," said Tinker.

"The dickens. You mean Conlon's gone? He's probably skipped out of town then. Blast his hide. I wanted a chance to face him and tell him a few things,—make him

take back some of his lies. Where does he live? Do you fellows know?"

"I—well I don't know where he lives exactly, but I saw him once down in the Red Hook Alley district. Why?" demanded Maul looking across at Don curiously.

"Why? Well I'm going to find him, that's why," said Don abruptly as he swung up onto the edge of the bed and reached for his clothes.

"You mean you are going down to Red Hook Alley? Gee, boy, that's a tough place. You're liable to get into trouble," exclaimed Tinker.

"Well, if you go, I'm going with you," said Maul also swinging out of bed.

Don stopped dressing and turned to Maul.

"Come along, old man. I'll be glad to have you. You know this town much better than I do and four fists will be able to do much more than two in a pinch. We'll do a little detective work and find that fellow, and if we can't prove he's a crook and responsible for the thieving he's blamed on

us fellows, at least we can get the satisfaction of giving him the beating he deserves."

"You're crazy, both of you," exclaimed Tinker. "Any fellow who thinks he can pick a fight with someone living in Red Hook Alley and get away without a busted head is just plum loony. Why don't you wait until Babe and Dan get through packing up your camp outfit and come up here to the house? We could get a bunch of other fellows together by that time and go down there in a gang. At that we would all probably get beaten up but we'd stand some chance of a few of us coming out alive."

"Nothing doing. Maul and I will do this job together. If we don't show up by nine o'clock to-night then you and Dan and Babe can get a couple of cops and come down there to look for us," said Don pulling on his trousers.

"Yes. That's all right to say. But Red Hook Alley section is a tough place, and a big place too. How will we know where to look for you?"

"I'll leave a trail if we go into any buildings. Let Dan and Babe bring Lindy. He'll find us all right."

"All right. Go to it. But I think you are both coo-coo. Neither one of you are in any fit condition to go after a man like Conlon, after what you went through last night. You had better wait long enough to let mother get you some supper before you start."

CHAPTER IX

Both Don and Paul Maul realized that there was more to what Tinker had said than they were willing to admit. They both felt a trifle weak and uncertain on their feet when they finished dressing. But they were both hungry which was a good sign, and they did not turn down Tinker's invitation to have some supper, especially when it was heartily seconded by Tinker's mother.

They were feeling a lot more fit when they left Mrs. Muir's dining room a little after six o'clock and started toward Ovington. Dan and Babe with Lindy on a leash arrived just before they left, and when they heard what Don and Maul planned to do they were all for going along, but Don persuaded them to remain behind and wait to see how their mission turned out.

"If we can get any direct evidence on Conlon we'll call a policeman and have him arrested—that is, if we find him," said Don. Then he added, "I honestly believe he has been behind a lot of the trouble down at the field. I think he's been using his watchman's job as a blind behind which to do a lot of thieving, and if that's true it ought not to be very hard to prove it."

The more Don thought of this as he and Maul swung along the street toward the business district of Ovington, the more convinced he became that Conlon knew more about the stealing that was being done at the flying field than anyone suspected. He recalled how anxious the night watchman always was to get him and his companions out of the factory as early as possible each evening. He remembered Conlon's constant references to the thieving that was being done and his intimation that they might get blamed for the trouble if they were not careful. He remembered too the night Lindy had chased the thieves away from the rear

of hangar No. 2 and they had found him with Conlon cornered in the doorway of the factory. Conlon could just as well have been one of the three men Lindy chased that night. There was something behind the police dog's hatred for the night watchman after all, Don felt certain.

These and many other unpleasant thoughts about the night watchman filled Don's mind and kept him silent as he and Maul crossed the well lighted square in the heart of Ovington and headed toward the east end of town where the Red Hook Alley district was located.

Tinker's assurance that it was a tough place was confirmed with Don's first glance at "The Alley" which was the main thoroughfare of the section. It was a narrow crooked street that crawled its worm-like way down toward the railroad freight yards. It was poorly lighted, and dirty, and lined with very unprepossessing shops and stores, some of which had the thinly disguised appearance of the old saloons. It

was the slum district of Ovington, and Don was surprised to know that the town contained such a quarter.

"It was down toward the railroad yards that I saw Conlon one day last spring," said Maul. Then he added, "Of course he might not live down here at all. But there are so many hangouts in this section where a man of his type might be that we may stumble onto him."

"Well we'll fine-comb the district for him, anyhow," said Don watching keenly everyone he saw as they started down the street.

It was after eight o'clock when they entered the alley, but the thin, wan rays of lamp light reflecting through the dirt-smudged store windows and splashing the cluttered sidewalks with patches of dull illumination, combined with the glow of the occasional street lamp, afforded sufficient light for the two boys to scrutinize the faces of the many loungers in the various doorways. There was a big foreign population

in the district and every step and doorway contained a group of men or boys in their shirt sleeves, smoking and talking or laughing boisterously over some horse play or coarse story. But among them all Don did not glimpse the unpleasant countenance of Conlon.

"I don't honestly think we have a chance of finding him. He's probably in one of those joints that look like saloons," said Maul disappointedly, as they neared the darker end of the narrow street toward the railroad.

"I don't know how we can look those places over. We probably couldn't get in if we wanted to. I'm—"

Don stopped talking suddenly and clutching Maul's arm pointed across the street.

"Look. Read that sign over there. Just under the yellow light. See. It points into that alleyway between the buildings. What does it say."

"Cut-rate Gas and Oil," read Maul aloud.

"Does that mean anything to you?" queried Don in a half whisper.

"Why—or—sa-a-ay, by jingoes it does. That may be where—"

"—the gas and oil that has been stolen from the flying field is being disposed of," cut in Don. "That shop is sort of a half way supply station. Let's go down to the end of the street and cross over so we can come up past there and have a good look at the place. I'd like to see what's at the end of that dark alley."

"Right. So would I," whispered Maul.

The two boys walked on down to the end of the street, crossed over and sauntered leisurely up on the other side. The dingy store in question proved to be an establishment that dealt in second hand tires and automobile parts. The interior resembled a junk heap with used spark plugs cluttering the counter, used tires stacked in the corner, and tools and a heterogeneous collection of other accessories littering the

shelves. It was presided over by a very surly looking individual with a bullet shaped head, a thick neck and a coarse featured face, the most conspicuous part of which was his thick, pendulous lips and small piggish eyes.

"Gosh. Look him over. If he isn't a thug, then I am," said Maul. Then he added, "The place looks like a-a-a one of those places where thieves dispose of stolen stuff."

"A fence. Exactly. Look there's a Shotwell carburetor in there—just the kind that was stolen from the Fancher. The rest of the stuff is all from automobiles. It wouldn't surprise me a bit to find out we've stumbled onto a place where a gang of auto thieves turn their stolen stuff into cash. I sure would like to go down that alley and see what's behind this outfit."

"So would I. Let's dodge in," whispered Maul.

"It's dark down there and we don't know

what we are blundering into," warned Don.

"Let's take a chance," said Maul.

"I'm willing. Duck in. I'll follow you," said Don.

Maul slipped into the alley. Don hesitated a moment in the shadow of the building and glanced up and down the street. Then from the inside of his coat he tore a strip of black cloth lining. This he tied to a stick of wood which he laid at the corner of the alley pointing in.

"Just in case we get into trouble in there, and Dan and Babe come looking for us. Lindy will scent that piece of cloth and Dan or Babe will know we've gone up the alley," he muttered as he hurried swiftly through the blackness of the driveway between the buildings and caught up to Maul.

The alley was long and dark and came out into an unlighted yard that was fringed with open sheds. At the far end was a tumbled down old house, with shutters sagging. It had evidently been a respect-

able dwelling once until the slums of the town had grown up around it and walled it in.

Maul pointed to the house and whispered.

"Down there. It looks like a fine place for a nest of thieves to hive up in."

Don nodded.

"Right. We'll have a look at it. But first let's see what we can find in these sheds."

Don slipped into the nearest one. Maul followed.

Like the shop in front it was cluttered with used tires. There were three automobiles in there, one surprisingly big and new, and looking strangely out of place with its bright nickel work. In one end of the shed, by the wan light that filtered through a dirty window Don discovered a new airplane propeller such as was used on a Fullerton. And under a tarp, a few moments later he found a collection of seven airplane carburetors, two of which he recognized as belonging to a Rolls-Royce engine. They

had unquestionably been stolen from the V.D. plane, the English machine that had been vandalized.

"By jove, this is the place we've been looking for. We've stumbled onto something, Maul. There's enough evidence in here to send Conlon and a half dozen men to jail. If we could only find him and his thieving companions."

"Let's sneak down to that house and see if he's in there," suggested Maul moving toward the front of the shed.

Don followed him out. Then gliding along like panthers and keeping to the shadows as much as possible, stealthily they slipped the length of the yard until they were crouching in the shadow of the delapidated old house in question. It was a spooky old structure with shutters hanging, and windows out on the second floor. Only from two side windows in the rear of the first floor did a dull light glow, and this was made more wan and spooky by the fact that it was masked by dirty shades.

Together the two boys slipped along the side of the building, avoiding a clutter of rubbish piled against it, until they reached the first of these two windows. The sills were about head high, and while they could not look into the room because of the drawn shades, the mumble of voices that came to them told them plainly that the room was occupied. Cautiously they laid their ears to the crack between the casement and the window frame. They could hear the conversation very distinctly.

"It's Conlon, and some others. Listen. He's talking," whispered Don, for he had little difficulty in recognizing the coarse, rasping voice of the speaker as that of the erstwhile night watchman.

"—an' it was a cinch while it lasted; a neat graft I call it. An' if Lefty hadn't of throwed his cigarette butt into that puddle of gas an' set th' dump on fire we could of cleaned up a big haul, even if ol' Fullerton was gittin' kinda snoopy. Purty soft with me nightwatchin' an' youse guys doin' th'

pickin'. Guess we gotta go back to th' buzz wagon graft agin now. There's some fancy noo cars on th' market us fellers might do pretty good business with. Th' cops has kinda quieted down ain't they?"

"Yeah. In th' auto graft dey have," replied someone. "But what about dis flyin' field stuff. Ain't dey gonna be stirred up on dat. Maybe some of us better mooch out to de mountains for our healt."

"Nawthin' to it. Nawthin' to it. I blamed it all on them boy scoots an' kids that's been hangin' 'round down there. I give ol' Fullerton a ear-full an' he believed it. He fired all th' kids, an' took on some ol' flatfoots from N'Yawk to do th' p'lecin. They're safe enough right here. I ain't scairt o' nuthin'. We'll just git busy on th' buzz wagon agin an'—"

Conlon's conversation was cut off abruptly as far as Don and Maul were concerned.

Both were so intent upon hearing what was being said in the room and their ears

were glued so close to the window ledge that they were oblivious to everything else. Neither of them heard stealthy footsteps behind them nor were they aware of dark shadows hovering over them until suddenly strong arms closed about them both, while knotted hands with kinked fingers sought their throats.

Came muttered exclamations from the darkness and the sound of struggling as Don and Maul tried to grapple with their assailants. But Don never even caught a glimpse of the man or men who held him prisoner before he felt a dull pain in the back of his head and was aware of a myriad of colored lights that danced across his benumbed brain an instant before all light faded from his vision and left him in dark oblivion.

CHAPTER X

HANDS going through his pockets relieving him of his wallet and change, and unstrapping his wrist watch from his arm aroused Don out of the state of semi-consciousness in which he lingered for some time after the blow on the head that had laid him low. But full consciousness came back to him with a rush once his brain started to clear and he opened his eyes to discover that he was slumped in a rickety chair in a dingy room lighted by a flickering gas jet. Not far from him, also sitting in a rickety chair, his white face and frightened eyes staring about fearfully, sat Paul Maul. The room was crowded with a half dozen men, all of them dark evil looking individuals with mean, ratty eyes and the earmarks of criminals and thugs of a vicious type. And

nearest Don stood Nick Conlon, looking down at him with his strange, fishy stare. It was Conlon who had been going through his pockets, and he was in the act of taking Don's watch from his wrist, when Don sat up with a jerk and yanked back his arm.

Conlon, with a cat-like movement took a quick step backward and his fist doubled as Don made his first sudden move.

"Don't make no quick passes kid or I'll crack yuh," he snarled.

Don looked at Conlon coldly, and as he peered into the criminal's mean eyes a feeling of contempt for this human parasite and his gang grew within him, dominating any fear he might have had of any of them.

"Crack me?" he repeated with scorn. "I suppose you would, you dirty rat. That's your kind. You like your victims when they are helpless; when you've got your gang behind you; when your own dirty mug is safe. You are the kind of crooks who blame their dirty work on a lot of innocent boys. That's your kind. Go ahead and crack me.

But you'd better make a good job of it because if I ever get out of here I'll have every policeman and detective in the whole country after you and your rotten scum. You petty crooks. You lying sneaks. You thieves and—"

"Shut up!" snarled Conlon, his eyes glaring and his face coloring under Don's tirade. He took a quick step forward and with the back of his hand slapped Don across the mouth so hard that Don's head snapped backward and blood began to flow where his lips were cut against his teeth.

"Take that, yuh pup. An' if yuh gimme any more lip I'll knock yuhr blasted head off. You two kids snoopin' 'round here wid yuhr amachoor detectif stuff are in fer a lotta trouble lemme tell yuh."

"You're the ones who are in for trouble, you low-down, thieving swine," grated Don as he brushed the back of his hand across his mouth and glared back at Conlon, with anger mounting. "And don't think you can shut me up with a slap on the mouth either.

You are going to get yours. I'll see to it just as soon as I get out of here."

"Yeah. But yuh ain't gonna git outa here, kid," replied Conlon. "Yuh're gonna stay here until we ship yuh out in a side door pullman, see? Coupla us guys is gonna take a vacation in th' Andarondack mountains an' we're gonna take you 'long wit us. We got uh camp up there where we go when our business gits too tiresome. You two birds u'd make purty good cooks up there for us, an' yuh can tell yuhr trouble to th' pine trees an' things. Don't worry, we've took care of bucks like you before."

"Is that so," replied Don contemptuously. "You think the two of us could disappear like that without having our families and friends start looking for us. I'll bet a dollar they are looking for us already. And they know just where we are too."

Don's statement caused a look of concern to cross several of the evil faces in the room and instinctively two of the men glanced toward the door. One of them, a fellow

called Bill, who had been one of Conlon's night watchmen, suggested:

"Say, mebby we best dig out, an' leave these fool kids here. There's a freight pullin' outa th' yards in haf-uh-hour."

"Aw, don't let this lippy kid scare yuh tuh death," snarled Conlon. "He's on'y bluffin'. I'll shut dis guy up fer good I will."

Conlon's fist closed and again he took a threatening step toward Don. But Don had had one crack on the mouth, and his fighting spirit refused to permit him to take another without some retaliation, though he knew full well that Conlon and his gang would soon give him the worst of it. As Conlon stepped forward Don's foot shot upward with all the strength he could put behind it and caught the gang leader squarely in the pit of the stomach, causing him to double up with a yell of pain. At the same time Don hurled himself from the chair full at the former night watchman and aimed an uppercut at his face.

Conlon's head was coming down as Don's fist swished upward, and the result was perfect. Don's bunched knuckles came in contact with the point of Conlon's jaw with a heavy smack, and the watchman crumpled like a sack of meal.

On his feet now, his eyes blazing and his face flushed with anger Don was full of fight.

"Come on Maul," he yelled, "Grab a chair! Let's fight our way out of here! Bust a few heads! Try for that window! They might get us, but we'll settle a few before they do."

And suiting his actions to his words Don seized the back of the rickety chair he had been sitting in and started in a mad charge across the room toward the nearest window. And Maul, frightened, but taking heart at Don's bravery, followed his example.

For the first few seconds of the fight Don and Maul had all the better of the situation. The thugs, expecting no such move, and utterly surprised at the show of nerve of the

two boys from the flying field, were taken aback. With startled faces they dodged and ducked out of their path as shoulder to shoulder Don and Maul, swinging chairs, started across the room to the nearest point of exit. But the thugs were nonplussed only for a few moments.

"Grab 'em! Stop 'em! They're gittin' away! Down 'em," shouted the thieves.

One seized a chair and swinging it above his head hurled it at Don, who fended it off with his own chair, only to have the one he carried crumple under the blow and go to pieces leaving him with the crooked back in his hand.

Another thief jumped in and aimed a punch at Maul. But it never landed because Maul, as thoroughly aroused now as Don was, shattered the chair he wielded on the gangster's head, flooring him.

Both boys were weaponless now save for the remnants of chairs they clutched. Missiles began to fly. Beer bottles that had been standing on the table came sailing

through the air at the swiftly dodging Maul and Don to explode with dull reports and a shower of glass against the wall behind them.

With their chairs shattered, and the boys weaponless the gangsters seemed to gather courage.

"Git at 'em! Buckle inta 'em! Smear 'em!" came the yells as the thugs surged forward to block the boys' path toward the window.

It became hand to hand now. Don and Maul threw away the broken chair backs and began to wade in with their fists. And for a little while they were more than a match for the room full of thugs. Don planted a solid fist full into the face of Bill, the other night watchman, and felt the cartilage of his nose crumple beneath his knuckles. He poked a straight left into another angry face in front of him and followed it up with a right hook that dropped the thief to the floor with a groan.

But others surged forward to get at him.

They came in from all sides and even from behind with fists flying and hands clutching to grapple with them. Both Don and Maul were kept busy ducking and countering. They became separated as thugs crowded in between them. Don got a solid crack on the ear, and saw stars when a fist landed just above his right eye. But the thug who hit him saw just as many stars a moment later, when Don with a roar of anger hurled himself forward in a bull-like charge and planted, left, right and left again into the thief's face. The man went down before Don's rush, and Don because he could not stop himself became entangled in his legs and went down with him.

But even as he was falling Don realized that the fight had turned against them. Once down he knew that he would be an easy victim for the thugs. They would pile on top of him and beat him to unconsciousness.

Desperately he tried to save himself. He managed to turn as he was falling so that his

back would be to the floor and his arms and legs free to defend himself as best he could. But that served him little. Like a pack of human wolves the thieves threw themselves on top of him. Don fought fiercely, desperately, kicking and striking at the rage distorted faces above him. And flat on his back as he was he proved a handful for the thugs to handle, until one man, bigger than the rest threw himself astride Don's body and with many oaths seized him by the throat, taking all the blows that Don rained into his ugly face in a fierce effort to choke the boy to submission.

Don twisted and turned and tried to throw the thug off or to avoid the talon-like fingers that sought to seize his windpipe and throttle him. Twice he broke the man's grip but each time the thief lunged for a new hold, and finally his terrible fingers closed onto Don's flesh with the grip of a vice.

Still Don struggled, twisting and turning in a futile effort to break that grip. But

even as he fought he knew his cause was hopeless. The man's fingers closed tighter and tighter. Don's breath was cut off. His tongue was forced from between his lips. He began to struggle frantically for air. His chest hurt and the blood pounded in his temples. His eyes bulged. He began to grow dizzy. The room spun. The ugly leering faces of the gangsters danced before his eyes. Once more he was going out, this time by the painful method of strangulation. The end was near. He knew it. All that he could do was clutch at the thug's wrists and gasp for breath. Only a few seconds longer and consciousness would leave him. Only a few seconds longer and—

Suddenly a startling sound broke in upon the pounding in Don's ears. It was the crash of breaking glass accompanied a moment later by a terrible snarl of anger—a dog's snarl. Came shouts too, and shots, many of them. And at the same time the terrible grip on Don's throat was released. As through a fog he saw the angry expres-

sion on the faces of the thugs turn to alarm and terror. He saw the faces float away from him. He heard curses, exclamations of fright, more shots, and familiar voices.

All the time he was gasping frantically for breath; for cool fresh air to fill his tortured lungs. He sucked it in in great gulps, and quickly his brain and vision cleared. He sat up and looked around. The room presented an interesting picture.

It was twice as crowded as it had been before. Besides the thugs, all cowering in a bunch in one corner of the room with their hands raised above their head, there were several men in the gray uniforms of special policemen. Mr. Fullerton was there. So was Harvy Harmon and Lieutenant Graham from the flying school. And there were a half dozen boys, Dan and Babe and Tinker Muir among them. There was also the police dog, Lindy, standing guard over the prostrated form of Nick Conlon who laid where Don had felled him with his first punch.

Groggily Don staggered to his feet. Dan and Babe helped him. They looked frightened until Don grinned at them and steadied himself by holding onto the edge of the table.

"Doggone, I'm glad you got here. You were just in time let me tell you," he said, rather thickly.

"It sure looks so. Are you O.K. Don?" queried Dan England with concern.

"I guess so. How about Maul?"

"He's over there trying to stop his nose from bleeding," said Babe.

"How did you fellows get all these people together? What are Mr. Fullerton and Mr. Harmon and Graham doing here?" asked Don.

"Why they came up to Tinker Muir's house soon after supper to see you and Maul. They wanted to make some inquiries about the fire. We told them all about Conlon and how you and Maul had gone down into Red Hook Alley to settle with him. They had a sort of conference and they de-

cided to get some policemen and go after you and him too. We started out ahead with Lindy and they caught up in an automobile. When we struck Red Hook Alley we didn't know where to look for you, but Lindy did some scouting on ahead and pretty soon we saw him duck up an alley. You can bet we followed him. And when we got into that junk yard out there we didn't have much of a job finding where you were. Gosh, what a racket. It must have been some fight you were having."

"It sure was," admitted Don.

"We couldn't hold Lindy. He just jumped clear through that window and took the window frame right with him. When I came in he was standing over Conlon growling at him at if he wished he'd get up and fight. Funny how he hates Conlon, isn't it?"

"No it isn't funny in the light of what we have just heard," said Mr. Fullerton, who with Harvy Harmon came across the

room toward Don just in time to hear Babe's remark.

"Chief Thompson, the head of our new force of special policemen, has identified Conlon as Nix Nelson, an old time criminal and the leader of a band of automobile thieves who have been operating in New York and New Jersey. The police have been trying to round them up for some time but they have been mighty slick. Thompson seems quite tickled to have stumbled onto their hideout and nabbed the whole gang. As for Lindy's animosity toward Conlon, Thompson says Lindy is none other than King, the famous old New York Police Department dog; the one that was pensioned off and farmed out to a kennel over here in Jersey after years of service. King never liked it at the kennels and went off on his own early in June. That was about the time he wandered into your camp and adopted you. Thompson says he feels confident King trailed Conlon many a time in

New York and knew him as a crook and that is why he has always hated him. What a fine individual Conlon was for us to have hired as nightwatchman. While he gave them protection, his whole gang of thieves were stealing from the flying field all the time, and when it came to a show-down he blamed it all on you boys."

"They sure got away with a lot," said Don. "If you don't believe it go look into some of these sheds out there. There is one bunch of seven air-plane carburetors, two of them from the V.D. plane. They are Rolls-Royce carburetors. And Conlon was stealing himself, Mr. Fullerton. I honestly believe he was the one who was trying to take the carburetor off of the Hobson plane last night when the fire broke out. Maul and I found his coat and nightstick right beside the plane when we went into the burning hangar to get those machines out."

"That was a mighty nervy stunt you boys did in saving those planes," said Mr. Fullerton with enthusiasm. "I should have

known any fellows who would do such a fine thing would never steal gas and oil and other things from the field, I want to apologize to you all and tell you you are all welcome back to your old jobs."

"Gee, that's the best news yet," said Paul Maul who at that moment crowded into the little group with Gordon Graham beside him. "Listen, folks, Lieutenant Graham has hired me back again too, for helping to save the Hobson plane. And I'm going to be his assistant pilot in the Reliability Race. His assistant was taken sick this morning and is in the hospital for an appendix operation. How's that luck?"

"Tough on the other fellow but great for you. Congratulations, old man. I'm glad we got the Hobson out of the flames," said Don warmly extending his hand to Maul.

Maul grasped it with enthusiasm and looked Don full in the eyes.

"I thought you and your pals were a bunch of softies—apron string aviators as I called you, being Boy Scouts. But I owe

you an apology. You're a great guy, Craig, and some fighter."

"And I owe you an apology, Maul. For a long time I went around believing that you and some of those Ovington fellows who hung out behind hangar No. 2 were doing all the stealing at the field. Why I even thought you drained the tanks of the Black Hawk and made us lose the speed climb."

"What? Did you honestly think as little of me as that?" exclaimed Maul. Then he added, "But I can't blame you. I acted like a big bully when I first met you fellows. Then getting myself fired and all, and hanging around the field the way I did didn't help you to form a good opinion of me."

"Right. But there was something else that made me suspect you. Remember the day I walked onto you and Tinker Muir behind the second hangar. I overheard you say something about settling the chances of the Black Hawk in the speed climb. It

sounded like a threat to me then, and when the gas and oil was drained from our machine I thought you had done it."

Maul looked puzzled for a moment. Then suddenly he grinned.

"Oh, I remember now. Why Tinker and I were talking about the Hobson. Tinker had just heard then that Graham was going to drive the Golden Eagle in the races. It was a secret but he came out to tell me about it because he knew I would be interested for Graham's sake. And when I heard it I was tickled to death. I always thought that the Hobson was just as good a plane as the Fullerton, and with Graham as pilot I figured he'd win both races. And he sure grabbed off the speed climb nicely didn't he?"

"Yes. But only because we ran out of gas. We would have won it otherwise. He won't come home first in the Reliability let me tell you, because the Fullerton is going to have full gas and oil tanks and we're going to burn a hole in the sky."

"We'll burn one first in the Hobson, and let your fellows in the Fullerton crawl through it after us," said Maul banteringly.

"I'll buy sodas for the crowd if the Black Hawk doesn't show you the way across the finish line," said Don with a grin.

CHAPTER XI

THE Black Hawk equipped with its new landing gear, was brought back from the Hewlett farm the second day after Don with Dan and Babe, returned to the landing field and reestablished their camp. The three days that followed before the date of the big cross country Reliability Race were indeed hectic ones for them and for everyone else connected with the Fullerton factory, for the Black Hawk, after her forced landing had to be entirely reconditioned and tuned up.

But the same thing held true in all the other shops and aviation camps at the field, for the planes caught in the fire, and those that had participated in the speed climb were all undergoing a thorough overhauling and retesting.

For three days and part of three nights the various crews worked under pressure, but the result was that with the dawn of Saturday, the day of the big race, not a single plane, save the Bristol which had been destroyed by fire, was missing from the squadron entered in the international Reliability Race, for even the Fancher and the English plane the V.D. had been furnished with new parts rushed forward by agents in New York.

Don, with Babe and Dan, and the two Wright mechanics, Simpson and Brackett, labored hard and long on the reconditioning of the Fullerton plane, and by Friday afternoon, they were very tired. But they were very happy too, for after Don and Mr. Harmon brought the Black Hawk out of the air at the end of its third trial flight that day, the test pilot pronounced the ship in perfect condition.

"Bully. Barring accidents we'll beat the field," said Mr. Harmon. Then he added, "Now you fellows lay off; especially you

Don. Go back to camp and rest up, then go down town to the movies or get some other diversion this evening. Do anything to forget about the race to-morrow. Just see that you get a good night's sleep and are in the pink of condition in the morning. We will have to fly the race of our lives I think. I have been watching Graham and his Golden Eagle to-day, and he has some ship there. And there are a few others that are not going to be so easy to trim. The Fancher is one, the Vedor-Benz is another and that V.D. plane is no creeping turtle let me tell you. Good night, don't worry, and take care of yourself."

But as it happened Mr. Harmon needed to heed the warning that he gave Don more than the patrol leader did.

Don took care of himself. He was too tired to do anything else. He and his two companions went back to camp, cooked supper, and then because they were too weary to do much else, they laid around camp discussing the race of the morrow and

studying a map of the big, thousand mile triangular course to be flown by the racing planes next day. At nine thirty no longer able to keep their eyes open they put out their camp fire and turned in to sleep the sleep of the just until six o'clock the next morning.

They turned out early, and breakfast was the product of their combined efforts. Babe fried the eggs and bacon, Dan cooked up the cereal while Don prepared some grapefruit. Dishes were washed in a hurry and by half past seven camp was in shape and they were off to the air field.

But as early as they were, they were not the first on the scene of the day's activities by any means. Automobiles crowded with spectators were already arriving. And from the number of cars coming down the hill from Ovington at that early hour it was evident to Don that the Reliability Race held the interest of the nation that day, if not of the entire world for Don noticed a group of electricians stringing wires to a

newly erected press table near the judges' stand, and he knew that before the race started a dozen telegraph instruments, and several microphones would be installed on that table with men stationed at them to report the progress of the big event to distant corners of the world. It was all very thrilling and Don could not help feeling elated when he realized that as the second man in the cock-pit of the Black Hawk he was to share a little of this national interest. He could not know then, of course, what an important part he was to play in the big event of the day.

By eight o'clock the field was a hive of activity. Planes were beginning to appear from the various hangars, with mechanics and pilots fussing over them, and priming them for the big test they would be subjected to in a few hours.

Don, with his two companions went directly to the Black Hawk's hangar at the rear of the Fullerton factory, and by the time they had the doors unlocked and

thrown open, Simpson and Brackett, the mechanics appeared on the scene. A little later Mr. Fullerton and two friends arrived and watched the big silver and black bird being wheeled out onto the field.

"Where is Harmon?" Mr. Fullerton asked Don as he looked at his watch.

"I don't know," admitted Don, "I'm surprised that he hasn't arrived yet. I have been looking for him. What time is it?"

"Going on toward nine o'clock. The race starts at ten sharp," said Mr. Fullerton uneasily, and added, "I do hope nothing has happened to him."

Don had been worrying about the test pilot, and Mr. Fullerton's obvious uneasiness did not allay his fears. Where was Mr. Harmon? Could he be ill, or had he met with an accident? Don grew exceedingly nervous, as nine o'clock passed and the hands of his wrist watch crowded the half hour. He found himself spending a great deal of time looking up the long hill that led away from the flying field and try-

ing to pick out a maroon roadster in the big string of cars that came crawling down. At half past nine, with a troubled expression on his face he, with Dan to help him, went to the locker room and got into his flying togs. He also donned his parachute outfit for there was a big factor of danger in the long six hour race that he wanted to guard against.

At quarter to ten he appeared on the field again, to find Mr. Fullerton and everyone else of the Black Hawk camp highly nervous. Harvy Harmon had not yet appeared. The crowd at the flying field was dense. There were thousands of spectators. Already all the planes had been wheeled to the starting line including the Fullerton ship. Pilots were conferring with the judges.

"By Jove, this is terrible," said Mr. Fullerton a little nervously, "I don't understand. I—"

He stopped talking abruptly. Down the hill, flashing in and out of the creeping line

of cars, and disobeying all police and traffic regulations came Harmon's maroon roadster. But as it roared its way onto the field in a cloud of dust, and came to a stop behind the Fullerton factory it was very evident that something serious had happened to the car, and to its occupant. The left side of the machine was badly crushed, with fenders and running board torn away. The windshield was shattered. And Harvy Harmon, as he stepped out of the driver's seat, was white and drawn, with a look of intense pain in his eyes.

"In mercy's name, what has happened to you, Harmon?" exclaimed Mr. Fullerton, as he with Don and the whole Black Hawk crew behind him, hurried toward the test pilot.

Harmon smiled weakly.

"Rotten luck. Had an accident coming over. A New York bus hit me. Shook me up a little I guess. I—I—don't be annoyed. It's nothing. Go confer with the judges will you, Don? I'll be out in a moment," said

the pilot as he hurried toward the locker room.

Don, considerably disturbed, hustled toward the judges' stand and joined the group of pilots there, explaining that he was serving for Mr. Harmon until the pilot got dressed. The race was to be over a thousand mile triangular course, the first leg of which was from Ovington Field to the field in Pittsburgh. The second leg was from Pittsburgh to Washington, at —— Field and the last leg from Washington back to Ovington Field and the finish. Don knew all this. He had studied a map of the course carefully. He was more interested in the condition of his chief, Harvy Harmon, than he was in the perfunctory instruction of the judges. Mr. Harmon had been bodily hurt in the smash up. Probably internally injured, ribs smashed, maybe. How seriously hurt Don could only guess at.

The judges had just finished their instructions when Mr. Harmon, with Mr. Ful-

lerton walking beside him, came across the field. Harmon limped a little. There was a grim expression on his face and Don could tell that he was doing his best to fight the pain that wracked him. Don hurried toward him.

"You're hurt—a lot, aren't you?" he exclaimed to the pilot.

"No—not much. Just a little shaken, that's all. I may have a broken rib,—but that's all. I'll be O.K. when we start flying."

"But are you equal to it, Harvy? Rather than have you fly and take a chance on your life, I'd withdraw the Black Hawk from the race. You might have serious internal injuries," protested Mr. Fullerton.

"No. No. We're going through with the race and we are going to win. I'm O.K. Don't worry. Just help me into the plane, Don. That's it. Oh I'm O.K., I tell you. Please don't fuss, G. K. Watch for us to come home leading the pack," said Harmon, forcing a smile as Don and Mr. Fullerton

helped him up into the cock-pit of the Black Hawk and settled down beside him.

Harmon waved his left hand to Mr. Fullerton and the ground crew of the Black Hawk and adjusted his goggles, and head gear. Brackett was already on the propeller of the machine. The starter, with his checkered flag, was in the stand and the timers were watching their cronometers. Harmon adjusted spark and ignition, grasped the controls and nodded. Brackett whirled the propeller and the Black Hawk's motor roared to life.

Every other propeller up and down the long line of planes gathered at the start was whirling. Don looked down the line. Four planes distant he picked out their most likely rival, the Golden Eagle. Maul was in the cock-pit beside Lieutenant Graham and as Don looked in his direction he grinned and waved his hand. Then he made some motions with his lips which Don interpreted as a challenge. Evidently Maul and Graham both expected to carry off the honors in

this race as the Hobson had done in the speed climb. Don wondered vaguely what the outcome of this big race would be. He looked at his watch. In ten seconds the flag would drop and the gun would roar that would send them away. He glanced at Harmon. The man's face, beneath his goggles, was chalky. His lips were compressed into thin, straight lines. He was suffering.

Boom!

The starting gun sounded. Don grasped the dual controls a little firmer. Harmon accelerated the motor and with a swish and a roar the Black Hawk leaped across the field in company with fourteen other racing ships and took to the air headed westward.

Don's interest was concentrated in that first rush of the start. Onward and upward they soared above the hill to the west of the field, above Ovington's housetops, above the rolling Orange Mountains. The steely ribbon of the Lackawanna Railroad tracks showed below them. They leveled off at two thousand feet, and straightened out due

west, with air-planes of the squadron thundering on either side and behind them. It was then that Don realized for the first that the big race was really on, and he thrilled with the realization that he was playing a part in it.

But a moment later that thrill changed to a chill as he felt the Black Hawk lurch suddenly. Instantly he shot a glance toward the pilot and to his horror he discovered that Harvy Harmon had slumped in his seat. His hands had dropped from the wheel. His head had sagged forward on his chest. And from the corner of his mouth dribbled a bright red trickle of blood staining the leather of his jacket, an indication of serious internal injuries.

Harmon had collapsed at the controls. For all Don knew he might be dead there in the cock-pit beside him. What on earth should he do in such an emergency?

For the space of several seconds Don was panic stricken. But he mastered himself instantly. There was only one thing to do.

Harmon was not dead. He was still breathing. But he was badly injured. He must turn the plane about and rush his chief back to the field and the hospital. It was necessary to save his life.

Grasping the dual controls a little firmer Don dropped the head of the plane and started downward below the level of the racers. And as the other planes roared past him overhead he began to circle on the back course. The Black Hawk was withdrawing from the big race to rush her pilot to the hospital.

Back to the field scudded the silver and black ship, Don thinking of nothing save the necessity of reaching Ovington as soon as possible and make a perfect landing.

As they sped over the tremendous crowd that lined the airport, Don looking down could see thousands of faces upturned toward him in wonder. But he was not interested in them. He was interested in making a perfect landing. Down he dropped,

circled, leveled off and straightened out. Then with a cushioned bump the wheels of the Black Hawk struck the sod, rebounded, struck again and taxied across the field as Don applied the brakes.

A little group headed by Mr. Fullerton came running toward him. But they did not need to query the reason for the plane's return. They could see the pilot slumped in the driver's seat and men began to swarm up onto the steps of the plane to lift the unconscious Harmon down.

"He collapsed. Get him to a hospital," directed Don as he climbed out of the cockpit of the plane.

A big touring car came roaring onto the field. The limp form of Harvy Harmon was passed through the door, and made comfortable as the machine turned and sped away toward Ovington and the hospital.

Don watched it go. Then he hurried toward Mr. Fullerton.

"Don't withdraw the Black Hawk from

the race. See the judges. Let me substitute as pilot and take Dan England with me as assistant. We can win yet."

"Win? With the field fifteen minutes ahead of you, Don? That's mighty questionable. The rest of the planes are all out of sight by now."

"Never mind! Let me try, please," begged Don. "Fifteen minutes in a six hour race doesn't mean everything."

Mr. Fullerton looked at him searchingly for a moment.

"By Jove, you might be able to do it," he said. "Get Dan England. I'll see the judges and ask their permission to let you make a second start. Hurry."

CHAPTER XII

A TREMENDOUS cheer burst from the thousands of spectators who lined the field, when the Black Hawk, with Don in Harvy Harmon's place, and Dan England beside him, took to the air a second time and headed westward twenty minutes behind the field of contestants. While Mr. Fullerton had been seeking the judges' permission to allow the plane to start a second time news of why Don had returned, along with the fact that he intended to start again and fly the course despite the handicap the field had on him, had spread swiftly among the thousands gathered there, with the result that Don was looked upon as something of a hero, and the Black Hawk suddenly become the sentimental favorite of the big race.

To be very truthful, both Don and Dan England thought very little of their chances to get anywhere in the contest, for fourteen of the best planes in the world were miles ahead of them by now and tearing through the air at their best pace to complete the course in record time. But the Black Hawk, through Don's carelessness, had been kept from winning the speed climb, and Don was reluctant to have the unfortunate accident to Harmon keep the Fullerton plane out of the second big race. He determined to fly the course and make the best time possible under the circumstances. And he had the forlorn hope that he might overhaul most of the field and come home somewhere within reasonable distance of the winner.

Once more the Black Hawk sped over Ovington, and above the Orange Mountains, and picked the gleaming steel rails of the Lackawanna tracks. Don leveled away then and grim lipped and determined began to nurse the Black Hawk to a speed the fine ship had never yet attained. Air speed and

a lot of it was the only thing that could help the Fullerton now and Don proceeded to work the air-speed indicator up to a point at which it had never vibrated before. It crossed the 150 mile mark. It reached 175, then two hundred, two hundred and ten, twenty, thirty. There it became stationary vibrating with the pulsation of the motor. Don looked far ahead. None of the planes, not even the very tail enders, were in sight. How far ahead were they? How hopeless was the Black Hawk's situation?

He looked aloft. There were cumulus clouds above them. Those clouds were ten thousand feet up while the Black Hawk was roaring along at the five thousand foot level, and bucking a cross wind. Those clouds were drifting westward. He might add five or ten miles an hour to their air-speed if he climbed up to the ten thousand foot level and took advantage of the air currents.

He tilted the Black Hawk's nose a little and slowly climbed. The altimeter read six, then seven, then eight thousand feet. At

nine thousand feet the wind was on their tail and both he and Don stared hard at the air-speed indicator and smiled happily as they saw the needle crawl higher and higher. Their speed was terrific. Better than any Fullerton plane had ever done. Better than any plane of their class had ever attained before.

On they sped. The silver ribbon of the Delaware flashed below them, the Water Gap was far to their right. They had left the Lackawanna Railroad tracks now. They angled across another line of tracks and still another. Don identified them as the Lehigh Valley Railroad tracks. Easton was behind them. Bethlehem just under them. Allentown ahead of them. The Pennsylvania Railroad tracks swung in sight a little later, and Don took them as their guide. They were flying over the Susquehanna River. On they sped. They left the river and crossed the low rolling Pennsylvania Mountains. Harrisburg, with the state capitol standing out in bold relief,

loomed ahead with the Pennsylvania tracks stretching on to the westward.

Beyond Harrisburg, Dan clutched Don's arm, and pointed ahead. Far in the hazy distance were four planes, three in a bunch and one well out ahead. They were the trailers in the big race, and Don as he saw them realized that they were cutting down the distance between them and the leaders swiftly. They might stand some chance of getting a place in the big Reliability contest after all.

At Altoona they overhauled the rear plane. It was the Blue and Gold Eto. The Black Hawk sped past with a rush and cut down the next and next in line. The Pom and the Fairchild passed behind with the green and orange Baro a mile ahead and lower down. Ten minutes later, crossing the summit of the mountains the Black Hawk, fairly screaming through the sky, passed the Baro two thousand feet above it.

"Four down," yelled Don happily. "We won't be the last to come in anyhow."

Dan could only guess what he said because the terrific roar of the motor drowned his voice. But he nodded and grinned and a few moments later pointed ahead again.

Two more planes were in sight, widely separated. The Fullerton was cutting down the distance on both of them.

The nearest proved to be the vermillion, Petcarn, and the more distant, Don was surprised to discover as he drew up to it, was the English plane, the V.D., one of the favorites in the race. Something was wrong with the machine. It was laboring heavily.

The Black Hawk drew abreast of it and started to forge past. Don looked across the air space at the pilot. He seemed busy with some adjustment. But even as Don watched he saw the driver straighten up and wave to him, and presently the English plane began to gather tremendous speed, and to stick very close to the flying Black Hawk. Evidently whatever trouble the plane had been laboring under had been corrected by the pilot for its air speed in-

creased tremendously. Indeed, an individual race developed between the Fullerton and the Englishman, and they fairly tore through the air, first one ahead and then the other for the next hour or longer.

That sprint carried them all the way to Pittsburgh and they overhauled and passed the Marie Antoinette meanwhile.

It became a mad race with the smoky stacks of the steel city in sight, and the black and white pylon of —— Field, the first turning point, on the horizon. But the Black Hawk had the advantage of height. Flying ten thousand feet up, Don's ship was twice as high as the V.D. and in the zoom downward for the pylon the Fullerton gathered terrific speed,—more than it had yet attained during the race. The result was that the Black Hawk walked away from the Englishman and made the pylon a hundred yards in advance, while the big crowd, that had gathered on the aviation field, cheered mightily, for they had been able to watch the race between the two machines

for a long distance despite the smoky atmosphere.

For a mile beyond the turn the V.D. clung to the Black Hawk's tail. Then suddenly it appeared to experience engine trouble again for it began to drop far behind as the Black Hawk, climbing steadily, sped onward. When the red and blue English plane became a mere speck in the distance, Don shouted:

"That's seven down. We're in eighth position. Not so bad. We may overhaul some more between here and Washington!"

But the cross country dash to Washington proved to be the most monotonous part of the long race. Wooded hills, high mountains, silver streams and pleasant villages slipped past beneath the Black Hawk, but no more contestants appeared on the horizon. As they reached the Maryland border, Don made out a white machine, down in a big hay field. He zoomed to a height of about a thousand feet above the ground as he sped past and saw that the Chillings-

worth had been forced out of the race and had made an unexpected, but safe landing in a big hay field. The pilot and assistant waved to them as they roared southward.

The dome of the capitol and the orderly streets of Washington were in sight before they discovered any more planes ahead. Then they located two, the blue and varnished Vedor-Benz just making the pylon at Bolling Field, and the green Pauling speeding northward a mile ahead.

"There's our next two. We're after them in a cloud of star dust," yelled Don enthusiastically as he zoomed downward for the turning pylon, slid around it and straightening out, cut loose in full pursuit of the two planes ahead.

Overhauling the Vedor-Benz proved to be a task. Mile after mile the blue and varnished bird kept ahead of the Black Hawk. They both overtook and passed the green Pauling, but it was not until they were roaring their way high above the mist enshrouded Baltimore that the Black Hawk

drew abreast of the blue plane, then slowly forged ahead and left it behind.

"Nine down. Boy we are not doing so badly at that. I begin to think we've got a chance in this race. We're in fifth position with only the Fancher, Spad, Cord and Hobson leading us. I wonder how far ahead they are?" shouted Don.

Dan shook his head. He only half understood what Don had said for the wind had snatched the words from his lips and the roar of the motor had drowned them completely.

Don peered steadily ahead as the Black Hawk roared onward on a course straight for Wilmington, and Philadelphia where the home stretch to Ovington began.

On and on thundered the bird thing. Far to the left gleamed the Atlantic, vague in the hazy distance. Ahead earth and sky blended in a gray mist. Somewhere in that mist the four lead planes were hidden as they roared their way toward the finish line. How far ahead they were and which

was leading Don wondered? He had an idea that the Golden Eagle was well out in front. He almost hoped so for if the Black Hawk could not win for some reason or another he wanted to see the Hobson come home first. He hoped he could come in sight of the golden yellow machine Graham was flying. He would give anything to overhaul it; to have a brush with it. But that was expecting almost too much. The Hobson was far too fast to be overtaken he was afraid.

Wilmington passed beneath them, and presently they were following the gleaming Delaware toward Philadelphia.

Within sight of the city he caught the glisten of two planes far ahead. They looked like the Cord and the Fancher, having a brush with each other. But he saw, with a feeling of satisfaction, that the Black Hawk was slowly but surely running them down. At Trenton he caught up with the two of them, and at Lakehurst as they flashed over the big Navy hangar where the

Los Angeles was housed he passed both and caught sight of the Spad in the distance.

"Wow. On the home stretch, in third place with the Spad just ahead. Not so bad," he yelled enthusiastically as he nursed the Black Hawk to still greater heights and sped onward.

"Air speed! Air speed! That's the thing we need. More and more of it!" he kept chanting to himself as he watched the air-speed indicator eagerly.

He did everything he knew to increase the terrific speed of the Black Hawk and so advantageously did he use every air current that the silver and black ship fairly screamed through the sky as it raced northward.

They were running down the Spad. At Princeton, above the college grounds he overhauled the silver and blue plane and passed it five thousand feet high.

"Second place! Wow! And there's the Golden Eagle! Out there! Look at him, Dan!" he yelled almost wildly, for far off

to the northeast, and going like a streak gleamed the gold and black plane that Graham and Maul were driving.

Could they cut down that big lead the Hobson had before they reached Ovington? Could they overhaul and pass the Golden Eagle? They had cut down the handicap the Hobson had had on them at the start. But could they overcome the rest before the finish line was reached?

Don was on the edge of his seat. Every muscle was tensed. His jaw was squared. His eyes glowed with the light of determination and his lips were compressed into thin straight lines. He did everything he could to get the very utmost of speed that was in the Black Hawk.

And slowly but surely the Fullerton plane responded to his efforts and sped through the air still faster. They were gaining. There was no doubt of it. The Hobson's lead was being cut down. Ten more miles to fly and the Hobson scarcely a mile ahead. On they roared. Mile after mile flashed

beneath them. They were five miles from Ovington. The Golden Eagle was scarcely a quarter of a mile ahead. A quarter of a mile ahead and five thousand feet down, for once again Don was flying up very close to the white and fluffy cumulus clouds that hung in the summer sky. But he needed that extra height. He wanted it for one last headlong dive downward across the finish line.

Ovington was three miles away. He could see the top of the pylon above the treetops. The Hobson was scarcely a hundred yards out in front beneath them. On they sped. Another mile passed, and still another. The field with its tremendous crowd was in sight. A sea of upturned faces were gazing toward them. The Black Hawk and the Golden Eagle were on even terms,—on even terms save that Don's ship was twice as high as the Hobson.

The finish line was in sight. It gleamed white in the middle distance. Don was measuring the angle of descent with his eye.

All would be won or lost in the last half mile. He made ready to dive for the finish line. It was his only chance.

Suddenly he tipped the nose of the Fullerton downward and opened up everything, and with a terrific roar the Black Hawk started at a sharp angle downward headed straight for the white line that was their goal. And the speed of their drop combined with the motors' power made the plane plunge toward the finish line with the swiftness of a flash of lightning.

The Hobson dove a moment later. But being twice as high as the Golden Eagle Don's machine was traveling far the faster. At three thousand feet they were absolutely even. At two thousand feet the Fullerton was a hundred feet ahead. At a thousand feet they leveled off and the Black Hawk, with a mighty roar, sped across the finish line a hundred and fifty feet ahead of the Golden Eagle, and the winner despite a tremendous handicap.

What a roar of enthusiasm sounded from

the huge crowd when the Fullerton plane dropped to the field and taxied in a cloud of dust toward the far end before it turned and came back to the judges' stand once more. To see the silver and black craft that had been the last to leave the field come in the first by the narrowest margin set the crowd wild. They paid small heed to the Golden Eagle but cheered and cheered the Fullerton as the Hobson taxied up beside the Black Hawk and came to a full stop. Lieutenant Graham and Paul Maul climbed out and with hands extended came toward Don and Dan. The two boys leaped from the cock-pit to greet them.

"That was a great race you flew Harmon and—why it isn't Harmon. It's Craig and Dan England," exclaimed Gordon Graham. Then he demanded: "Where is Harmon? What happened? Why did you turn back anyhow?"

But before Don could answer Mr. Fullerton and a small crowd of his friends swept

down upon them to congratulate Don and Dan effusively.

"Great race? I'll say so, Graham. That was a race won under a big handicap," said Mr. Fullerton and briefly he told Graham of what had happened to Harmon and why the Black Hawk turned back.

"But you flew a great race yourself, Graham," he added. "I've had men watching you all along the course. Nothing reckless in any way. I want to congratulate you too. And I've a bit of news you'll be interested in. Mr. Hobson, your chief, and I have decided to join partners and combine the climbing qualities of the Golden Eagle and the speed of the Black Hawk in one machine. And we'll need test pilots; several of them. We'll need one very badly now until Harmon gets out of the hospital, which I'm happy to state will be in a couple of weeks at the longest, for he is not as seriously injured as I feared he might be. So I want to hire you back again, Graham, as

our test pilot, and you can bring your grease monkeys Maul and Muir with you. I'd offer Don Craig and Dan England jobs as test pilots too, only I know that at the end of their summer vacation they intend to go back to school. But I'm going to keep my eyes on both of them and give them real jobs just as soon as they finish with college. Will you come back with us, Graham, and abandon that dangerously foolish flying school of yours?"

"You bet your boots I will, Mr. Fullerton," said Graham enthusiastically while Don and Dan offered him and Paul their heartiest congratulations.

THE END

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